CANADIAN THESES ON MICROFICHE

21078

THÈSES CANADIENNES SUR MICROFICHE

AUTHOR/AUTEUR

O'GRADY, A.F.

TITLE/TITRE

PATTERNS OF MYTHOLOGY IN MODERN IRISH DRAMA.

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TITLE OF THESIS.....Patterns.....of....Mythology.....
........in...Modern....Irish....Drama
..............................................

UNIVERSITY.......University.....of....Alberta......

DEGREE FOR WHICH THESIS WAS PRESENTED.......Ph.D........

YEAR THIS DEGREE GRANTED...........1974....................

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# PATTERNS OF MYTHOLOGY IN MODERN IRISH DRAMA

by

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A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA
SPRING, 1974

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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TO TERRY

CHRISTINE, KATHLEEN AND LAURA

# ABSTRACT

This thesis is a thematic study of the dramatic treatment of Irish mythology in Ireland during the last one hundred years. In the Introduction a definition of myth is offered, followed by a discussion of how modern dramatists have reworked ancient myth for the theatre. Apart from James Joyce, Irish authors turned to their own legends for subject-matter and symbol, but their methods of presentation and of interpretation differ considerably.

In Chapter I the more popular Irish myths are briefly outlined. Samuel Ferguson and Standish O'Grady were largely responsible for reawakening an interest in these myths. They considered them to be examples of the virtues and glories of Ireland's heroic past. The strong nationalistic flavor of their poetic and prose versions of the legends, and their conception of Cuchulain as an Irish hero-figure, influenced subsequent dramatic interpretations. Like Ferguson and O'Grady, Lady Gregory was concerned with popularizing Irish myth. Her fluid, idiomatic translations provided an accessible source of material for such dramatists as W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge.

Chapter II examines Yeats's attitude to Irish myth: he emphasized its importance for the cultural and spiritual life of a nation, but was initially attracted to the mood of

the Celtic Twilight. His early plays are typified by a longing for the ideal spiritual world. Alice Milligan's Oisin trilogy, Edward Martyn's Maeve, and George Russell's Deirdre similarly evoke a mood of idealistic nostalgia, while pointing a lesson in Irish nationalism.

Chapter III returns to Yeats with a discussion of his more mature dramatic interpretation of Irish myth, through which he developed a system of symbols and created for himself a heroic mask in the figure of Cuchulain. His attitude to Deirdre as a tragic heroine was similar in many respects to that of Synge in Deirdre of the Sorrows.

Sean O'Casey and Paul Vincent Carroll approached myth with less reverence. Their plays are comic and satiric in tone. For O'Casey in particular, the symbolic figures of Irish myth could represent both true and false ideals.

The most recent dramatists have a more satiric attitude to the mythic heroes of Ireland. Both Denis Johnston and Maurice Meldon wrote kaleidoscopic plays which ridicule all false idols. The dramatic treatment of Irish myth has thus gone from one extreme to the other, following the pattern which Northrop Frye attributed to all literary adaptations of myth, a movement from the romantic and idealistic to the ironic and satiric.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Dr. Ronald Ayling for advice, encouragement and lunches. I also very much appreciate the fine critical works of Robert Hogan on modern Irish drama and on Sean O'Casey, and of Elizabeth Coxhead on Lady Gregory.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER PAGE

INTRODUCTION: MYTHOLOGIES . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 1

I THE STIRRING OF THE BONES:

Samuel Ferguson, Standish O'Grady and Lady Gregory . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 18

II INTO THE TWILIGHT:

W. B. Yeats, Alice Milligan, Edward Martyn and George Russell . . . . . . . . . . . . 96

III BEAUTIFUL LOFTY THINGS:

W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge . . . . . . . . . 156

IV "THE BURDEN OF OISEEN":

Paul Vincent Carroll and Sean O'Casey . . . . 216

V VACILLATION:

Denis Johnston and Maurice Meldon . . . . . . 275

CONCLUSION . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 312

BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 319

APPENDIX A . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 334

APPENDIX B . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 340

# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

ILLUSTRATION PAGE

1. Cuchulain in the Battlefield.
   Frontpiece to Standish O'Grady, In the Gates of the North (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1901). . 48

2. The Death of Cuchulain.
   Frontpiece to Standish O'Grady, The Triumph and Passing of Cuchulain (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1920). . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 52

3. Mrs. Patrick Campbell in the title part of Deirdre, 1908.
   Michéal MacLiammoir, W. B. Yeats and His World (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), p. 120. . 162

4. Diarmuid and Grainne: Costume designs by Michéal MacLiammoir.
   Bulmer Hobson, ed. The Gate Theatre, Dublin (Dublin: Alex Thom), 1934. . . . . . . . . . 336

# INTRODUCTION

## Mythologies

Man's compulsion to understand human life and its relationship with the world finds little satisfaction in logical or metaphysical reasoning. Only by creating for himself a reality, an imaginative system which is fluid enough to contain the contradictions and absurdities of life, can man hope to satisfy his demand for a pattern or order. This pattern of recreated existence can be termed myth. Insofar as it is an attempt to illuminate life through imaginative form, all art can be regarded as mythical, but myth in itself assumes a more religious response to life than art: it expresses man's need to project his personality on the impersonal universe, to create a divine or superhuman order.

Myths generally assume several forms: theogonies, which deal with the birth and genealogy of the gods and recount the story of creation; Olympian cycles, which relate the exploits of the gods; and heroic cycles which become identified with more specific historical events in the life of a particular society. When this body of myth finds artistic expression and assumes literary form, it has already begun to lose its credibility as religious truth, and since in its definitive form it is filtered through the minds of specific individuals, it becomes more the expression of an individual's reaction to life, rather than a reality in the collective unconscious of a race. The inner truth and efficacy of the myth is no longer apparent and it becomes subject to varying interpretations. It may be regarded as a form of distorted history of the race, or as a divine revelation, or as a system of symbols which can reveal an abstract truth. Modern interpretation of myth has tended to regard it with the clinical eye of psychiatry and anthropology. It is seen as symbolic of the inner reality of man, a projection of his unconscious mind. When seen in the light of physiology and psychology, myth becomes an expression of man's most basic reactions to the cycle of life, death and rebirth, and its complexities are simplified into patterns of seasonal recurrence. However, most literary expressions of myth exploit its more complex characteristics; its density and fluidity combined with its fundamental grasp of the truths of human life appeal to the modern author, who sees in myth a way to approach the complexities of the contemporary world.

The use of known myths as structural or thematic bases for modern literature is given recognition and approval by T. S. Eliot in his essays on James Joyce and W. B. Yeats. Eliot favors Joyce's use of Greek myth in Ulysses, however, rather than Yeats's use of a more restricted regional myth, which he describes as "Celtic and astrological cults".[1] Eliot acknowledges Yeats's emphasis on tradition, but feels that Yeats often limits himself to a minor mythology, a "little-Ireland folklore". It is Joyce's method which inspires Eliot:

> I hold this book [Ulysses] to be the most important expression which the age has found; it is a book to which we are all indebted, and from which none of us can escape. . . . In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. . . . It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.[2]

By reinterpreting an old world myth, Joyce helps make the modern world possible for art.

Of course, Eliot is in part explaining his own predilections for mythical allusions in his plays, where he tries like Joyce to juxtapose Greek myth and contemporary society. But he also identifies a trend in twentieth century literature towards more traditional forms and themes. This trend is particularly evident in modern drama. Despite the widespread taste for contemporaneity and social realism, the stage has its roots in ritual and religion, and can perhaps more readily return to the world of myth than can other art forms.

---

[1] Sean Lucy, T.S. Eliot and the Idea of Tradition (London: Cohen & West, 1960), p. 9.

[2] T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth", James Joyce: Two Decades of Criticism, ed. Sean Givens (New York: Vanguard Press, 1948), p. 201.

In the mid nineteenth century Richard Wagner emphasized the importance of myth in the theatre, and fifty years later W. B. Yeats advanced ideas for an Irish drama which echoed those of Wagner.[3] Both were fighting a theatre which had been reduced to melodrama and spectacle, and both set out to revive the spirit of tragedy through the medium of myth. Wagner and Yeats recognized the potentially powerful agent of social influence which the theatre constituted, and they used it for nationalistic purposes even while protesting the inviolate autonomy of their art. Wagner looked to the Greek tragedies for his prototype; his operas would involve the co-operation of all the arts in a dramatic representation of a mythic action:

> Myth provided the ideal form for expressing subjective reality. . . . It arose from psychological depths even more profound than those plumbed by self-reflection, and myth provided character, action, and locale of a kind suitable for epic or tragic treatment while remaining distinct from the most idealized representation of actual life. . . . [Myth could] satisfy the intellect while safeguarding the rights of the dream.4

Like Yeats, Wagner simplified his drama to concentrate on a strong emotional situation. Reality lay in the emotions, not in the superficialities of motivation or intention. Nor was there any need to modernize the mythical material, since its inherent truths were timeless. As several subsequent French and American dramatists discovered in their experiments with modern adaptations, the trivialities of "social realism" only serve to encumber the myth and fail to make it any more relevant because they have obscured the simplicity of its truths with the passing preoccupations of the time:

---

[3] It is likely that Wagner influenced Yeats'sdrama indirectly by way of Villiers de l'Isle Adam, whose symbolist play, Axel, so profoundly affected Yeats in Paris.

[4] Richard Wagner, Wagner on Music and Drama, ed. Albert Goldman and Evert Sprinchorn (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1964), p. 21.

> The incomparable thing about the _mythos_ is that it is true for all time, and its content, how close soever its compression, is inexhaustible throughout the ages. The only task of the poet was to expound it. Even the Greek tragedian did not always stand in full unconstraint before the myth he had to expound: the myth itself was mostly juster to the essence of the individuality than was the expounding poet. The tragedian had completely taken up the spirit of the _mythos_ into himself . . .
>
> The _mythos_ is the poet's ideal stuff - that native, nameless poem of the folk, which throughout the ages we ever meet new-handled by the great poets of periods of consummate culture: for in it there almost vanishes the conventional form of man's relations, merely explicable to abstract reason, to show instead the eternally intelligible, the purely human, but in just that inimitable concrete form which lends to every sterling myth an individual shape so swiftly recognizable.[5]

Even though Wagner stressed the universality of myth, he recognized its potential as a force for nationalism. Those legends which were an inherent part of the life of the country, whether latent or widely known, constituted powerful material for reawakening the soul of a race. This same idea sparked the Irish Renaissance: the spirit of nation and race must be found in the past, in the residual records of the formation of a distinctive society.

---

[5] Wagner, p. 90.

Both Wagner and Yeats emphasized that the artist must assume a reverential attitude to myth, but neither was averse to bending his sources to suit his purposes. A strict fidelity to the form or spirit of the original myth does not necessarily result in an art work of any consequence. However, modern adaptations or reinterpretations of ancient legends often ignore or misconstrue the spirit of the original, with the result that myth becomes a vacuous structuring device and loses its potential for profundity or universality.

Myth as source material for theme or for allusive symbols has been used extensively in twentieth century theatre. French dramatists, attracted to the challenge of recasting popular Greek myths, have experimented with dramaturgy and theatricality. André Gide emphasizes the timeless universality of myth and, like Yeats, uses the stage to achieve a distancing from the particularity of the present. For Gide the importance of heroic, historical, or legendary figures lies in their remoteness:

> Time, or any kind of distance, allows an image to reach us only after it has been stripped of everything episodic, bizarre and transitory, leaving only its portion of profound truth to work on.[6]

---

[6] André Gide, My Theatre, quoted by Hugh Dickinson, Myth on the Modern Stage (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969), p. 46.

Both Jean Cocteau and Jean Giraudoux find in the Greek mythos a means of realizing a theatre of art. But while Cocteau utilizes the barest rudiments of plot from the myths in order to develop a theatrical unit which integrates pantomime, scenery, music and dance, Giraudoux regards the Greek stories in a mildly ironic light which distorts or diminishes them. Giraudoux minutely examines philosophical questions which he develops from the basic circumstances, and balances different moral views by opposing sets of characters in extended debate. His theatre is a literary one, a theatre of speech, depending for much of its effect on the beauty of images and symbols, and the neat concision of debate. Jean-Paul Sartre also exploits the philosophical potential of myth: The Flies is a study in existentialism with the Oresteia providing character and motivation. Sartre's play, published in 1943, during the Nazi occupation of France, is also politically conscious. Myth is amenable to political manipulation, as the Greeks had already discovered. Despite its universal considerations, the weight of myth could be brought to bear on a particular national situation; because of its universality its weight could be a very persuasive force. Such writers as Wagner, Yeats and Anouilh exploit this propensity in myth. In Anouilh's Antigone the abstracted use of the Greek legend facilitates an allusive yet direct contemporary political reference, while contributing to the expression of a more universal theme. The multivalence, the fluidity of myth, permits the realization of several themes within the compact structure of a play.

The attitude of recent French dramatists to the old myths, unlike that of Corneille and Racine, is far from reverential, and they have been accused of debasing the material with which they work, so undermining the "raison d'être" of the myths with flippancy or sarcasm that the end result is often more a parody than a positive artistic statement. Although his indignation is directed explicitly against Cocteau, John Gassner's condemnation of The Infernal Machine is typical of a critical attitude which does not tolerate the bastardization of myth on the stage, finding its properties antipathetic to modernization:

> The ultimate object of the myth-mongers is to find symbols of universal significance. They find the significance easily enough, but it is significance without substance. The myth that had once been a part of the life of the people (and such a long time ago!) is now invented or fabricated. The myth that had once been a collective consciousness associated with custom, semi-history, and above all, ritual, now becomes a private, individual construction. The author, of course, helps himself to the supernatural elements of the myth. But in his work, since he is a modern and sceptical man, the supernatural is a sort of French dressing. The procedure is trivial or frivolous. . . . The author has not actually explored the meaning of the ideas associated with the myth - the ideas of life's or the god's purpose, the ideas of chance, the ideas of fate. He has adopted these ideas, as one puts on a costume for a masquerade.[7]

---

[7] John Gassner, The Theatre in Our Times (New York: Crown Publishers, 1954), p. 192.

Sartre, on the other hand, by no means finds the theatre and myth incompatible: the theatrical experience is in itself a mythopoeic process, and like any art form embodies the universal themes which are mythical because they are beyond space and time and deal with the fundamental questions of life and death. In Sartre's view theatre is a ritual speaking to the masses and dispelling anxieties by embodying them in mythical form:

> Theatre is a great, collective, religious phenomenon, capable of awakening in the recesses of the spirit the things all men of a given epoch and community care about. It explores the state of man in its entirety and presents a portrait of him. . . . It is austere, moral, mythic, and ceremonial in aspect. It attempts to show the public the great myths of death, exile, love. Its characters are people of flesh and blood whose tragic experiences are complete in themselves; and yet they are mythical in the sense that their experiences can serve as the embodiment of all similar experiences. The greatness of the theatre derives from its social and . . . religious functions; and thus, even as it speaks to the spectators of themselves it does so in a tone and with a constant reserve of manner that discourages familiarity and increases the distance between play and audience; for theatre is, and must remain, a rite.[8]

The relationship between drama and myth is, then, such a variable one as to defy any covering generalization. Whereas playwrights such as Sartre and Gide use it to heighten and ritualize their work, Giraudoux and Cocteau call into question the values basic to the myths they rework. American dramatists such as T. S. Eliot, Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, appear more circumspect in their treatment of mythical material, using it as a repository of human and divine truths which they can draw upon to bolster or reinforce comments made on a contemporary social scene. It is as if they find such material a bit foreign to the aesthetic tradition they wish to establish and so allude to it metaphorically; the substance of their plays can in fact be appreciated as an artistic whole without an obligatory knowledge of a particular myth. In his critical work on T. S. Eliot, David E. Jones neatly draws this distinction between French and American playwrights. The French give a new twist to ancient myths. Retaining even the original names, they emphasize the connection with the Greek legends. They want the audience to assume that their characters are literary creations, gradually acquiring new individual personalities. In other words, their characters are abstract types, which gradually assume human dimensions. The process ends in an image of modern man. Generally speaking, however, American dramatists such as Eliot follow the reverse process by starting from contemporary characters and showing that their plight is the same as that of the protagonists of the Greek epics and dramas. Everyday characters assume the proportions of permanent universal types.[9]

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[8] Jean-Paul Sartre, quoted by Dickenson, p. 220.

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[9] David E. Jones, The Plays of T. S. Eliot (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), p. 88.

T. S. Eliot intends his plays to be readily accessible to a public unacquainted with the intricacies of Greek or Arthurian myth, yet draws heavily on the specific interpretations which modern anthropological studies have given mythology. In many of his plays, as in his poetry, he interprets life in terms of the Grail Quest. Where he attempts a closer correspondence between the details of a specific myth and the preoccupations of contemporary society, as in The Family Reunion, he succeeds only in imposing a structure on the surface of the play. There is no organic interaction of present circumstance with the archetypal pattern.

A more ambitious modern adaptation of the Oresteian trilogy is attempted by Eugene O'Neill in Mourning Becomes Electra. O'Neill works out careful and credible parallels between Aeschylus's plot and his own, using as a transitional tool Freudian psychology. The inexorable feeling of fate so integral to Greek tragedy becomes the remorseless and destructive power of guilt. Jung's theories about myths as symbols of aspects of man's unconscious are here fully exploited. Myth loses its viability as an objective expression of truisms; it becomes a pattern of symbols, images of man's psyche. In his book, Freudianism and the Literary Mind, F. J. Hoffman points out the pitfalls of using myths simply as repositories of archetypal symbols. To attach a convenient mythical tag to a complex area of human experience is to oversimplify, even distort. It is too facile to categorize emotion and action by applying Jungian archetypes:

> The archetypal process, by enlarging and depersonalizing the expressive experience, threatens to destroy its individuality and its complexity. . . . There is a great difference between a tradition of the ritual observance of a fixed symbolic and mythical pattern and the direct, knowledgeable, ingenious, overt use of myth in modern literature. To explain present literary circumstances by reference to archetypal patterns is to ignore the pecularities of present practice and need.[10]

The trend in European literature during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries towards a revivifying of myth is also apparent in the literary revival of Ireland. This "Irish Renaissance" in fact took its initial impetus from a reawakening of interest in the Celtic mythical cycles of the Fianna and the Red Branch Kings, which had been retained in the racial consciousness through the folk stories of the Irish peasants. Although there existed a large body of manuscript material, this proved to be too turgid and fragmentary for general interest until it was reinterpreted and subsequently popularized by three individuals, who saw in the dry bones of Irish legendary history the skeletal beginnings for a new specifically Irish literature. Samuel Ferguson, Standish O'Grady and Lady Gregory committed themselves to the task of fleshing out these dry bones, through poetry, prose, and to a lesser extent through drama. It was their work which initiated a widespread examination of Irish myth.

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[10] Frederick J. Hoffman, Freudianism and the Literary Mind (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), p. 329.

The early dramatists tended to adopt a reverent attitude towards the legends of their country, trying to project what they considered to be the inherent high moral standards of their sources. The stage assumed an educative role; its function was to inform the populace about Ireland's splendid past. Hence the mythic material became a vehicle for moral exempla and nationalistic slogans, or it provided the imaginative means for a retreat into the remote regions of supernatural beings. The popularity of such treatments of Irish myths proved to be short-lived, since they catered to the whims of the moment.

James Joyce detected the dangers inherent in an effusive adoration of the past. Although he was charmed by the lyrical blandishments of the "Celtic Twilight", he repudiated any inward-turning nationalism and judged the majority of Ireland's literary figures to be a tribe of navel-gazers. Through the personality of Stephen Dedalus in the first chapter of Ulysses, Joyce derides their inconsequential efforts:

> Shouts from the open window startling evening in the quadrangle. A deaf gardener, aproned, masked with Matthew Arnold's face, pushes his mower on the sombre lawn

> watching narrowly the dancing motes of grasshalms.
> To ourselves . . . new paganism . . . omphalos.[11]

All the furious efforts of the myth hunters Buck Mulligan reduces to annotating the significance of mother Grogan's tea:

> —That's folk, he said very earnestly, for your book, Haines. Five lines of text and ten pages of notes about the folk and the fishgods of Dundrum. Printed by the weird sisters in the year of the big wind.
>
> He turned to Stephen and asked in a fine puzzled voice, lifting his brows:
>
> —Can you recall brother, is mother Grogan's tea and water pot spoken of in the Mabinogion or is it in the Upanishads? (p. 19)

Significantly, it is an Englishman, Haines, who is earnestly gathering up information on Irish myth, just as in Shaw's John Bull's Other Island it is the English Broadbent who proves to be the fanatical Irish nationalist. Joyce's specimen of Irish nationalism in A Portrait of the Artist, Davin, is a shallow and limited young peasant who stands in awe of the "sorrowful legend of Ireland":

> His nurse had taught him Irish and shaped his rude imagination by the broken lights of Irish myth. He stood towards the myth upon which no individual mind had ever drawn out a line of beauty and to its unwieldy tales that divided themselves as they moved down the cycles in the same attitude as towards the Roman catholic religion, the attitude of a dullwitted loyal serf.12

---

[11] James Joyce, Ulysses (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 13. Matthew Arnold's essay on the Celtic qualities of literature played a significant note in the "Celtic Revival" in both England and Ireland in the nineteenth century. See Chapter II.

[12] James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (New York: Viking Press, 1964 [1916]), p. 181.

For Joyce this preoccupation with ancient Irish mythus was one manifestation of the net of nationalism which he sought to escape. He considered Irish mythology parochial, characterized by a dearth of imagination and an impossible formlessness. Whereas Greek myths are universally relevant, Irish mythology lacks any moral sense and, moreover, is inseparably tied to its locale. The Citizen in Ulysses is Joyce's embodiment of all the myopia and strident nationalism which he associates with the authors of the Irish Rennaisance, and in the library episode of Ulysses, even Yeats is a target of his satire for his devotion to the mythological cause. Yeats's dramatic experiments are part of the parochial fustian of the Abbey Theatre; Joyce prefers the more socially dynamic drama of Ibsen.

Yeats's attitude to the old Irish legends, however, is far from being parochial. Although his early work is influenced by Ferguson, O'Grady and Lady Gregory, and by the more mystical adherents of the Celtic Twilight such as George Russell, he gradually develops a strong, personal, symbolic interpretation of myth which he expands to a more general human relevance. Yeats, in fact, holds the important pivotal position in the development of the literary treatment of myth in Ireland, for his earlier poetry and plays are characterized by a twilight atmosphere and a nationalistic bias, while his later works achieve a stark symbolic intensity which dispenses with the more limiting aspects of specific time and place. In fact, Yeats always regarded Irish myths as analogues of the myths of other nations, with the same general relevance as the Arthurian cycle, the Nibelungenlied, the Iliad or the Odyssey. For Yeats, the value of myth lay in its generation of powerful symbols. These he absorbed into his own mythopoeic imagination, and projected as integral aspects of a more comprehensive human mythology. His treatment of Irish myth, however, still preserves an elevated heroic tone; his plays depict an emotional climax in the life of a hero whose imaginative reality is reinforced by specific and recognizable character traits.

Later playwrights incorporate the heroic symbols of Irish myth into plays set in the twentieth century. Their mythic allusions depend upon a general public awareness of Irish traditions. Because such heroes as Cuchulain and Finn have been fully assimilated into the general consciousness, Sean O'Casey can ironically juxtapose contrasting sets of assumptions or ideas, treating his mythic sources according to the particular needs of his play. The most recent dramatists have extended O'Casey's satiric tendencies to the extreme, presenting the national mythic heroes as vehicles for satiric thrusts at popular prejudices. However, their satire, although sharply pointed and witty, depends on a detailed knowledge of specific myths, and is therefore limited by its terms of reference. The dramatic treatment of myth in Ireland has in a sense come full circle: initially it was limited by its strongly national and idealistic flavor and its close adherence to the details of Irish myth; now the satiric plays by Denis Johnston or Maurice Meldon may be limited by the same dependence upon detail. Yeats, Synge and O'Casey avoid this tendency towards parochialism and abstruseness because their better plays present a self-sufficient yet expansive imaginative reality. Theatre is pre-eminently a public art, and can only succeed when it is accessible to that public.

# CHAPTER I

## THE STIRRING OF THE BONES

### Samuel Ferguson, Standish O'Grady and Lady Gregory

> It is either in art, or nowhere that the dry bones are made to live again.
>
> C. S. Lewis

When Irish writers of the late nineteenth century rediscovered what Yeats regarded as the most plentiful treasure of legends in Europe, that vast compilation of Midd[illegible] Irish manuscripts which had survived neglect and abuse, they recognized in these stories of ancient Irish gods and men a rich source of distinctively Irish literature. That these manuscripts, hidden away in libraries and archives in Ireland and England, came into public view at all, was due primarily to the zealous interest of a few individuals, the most influential of whom were Sir Samuel Ferguson, Standish O'Grady and Lady Augusta Gregory.

The majority of the surviving manuscripts were compiled from the ninth to the twelfth centuries by monastic clerks, and were fragmentary, chaotic and often devoid of any literary merit, but several cycles of stories emerged from the welter of details which caught the imaginations of a few scholars of the nineteenth century and stimulated a fertile movement in modern Irish drama. These stories can be arranged for the sake of convenience into four general groups. The first is a Celtic version of the Olympic cycle in Greek mythology, for it deals with the coming of the Tuatha de Danaan to Ireland. This race of supernatural giants, tribes of the goddess Danaan, conquered the forces of darkness, the Firbolgs and Fomorians, and then in turn were defeated in battle by the Celts. They gradually retreated to the world of imagination and assumed the properties of gods in the minds of the poets: Dagda was the supreme deity; Danaan, goddess of fertility and plenty; Lir and his son Mananaan, gods of the ocean; Aengus, god of love, music and beauty; Lugh, a sun-god, and the Morrigu, goddess of war and death. The Tuatha de Danaan merged with the landscape, gradually diminishing in stature through the centuries to become the Sidhe and fairies of popular folklore.

It was the Ulster Cycle which most influenced Irish literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Found primarily in the oldest of the manuscripts, the Book of the Dun Cow, it was compiled in the twelfth century and transcribed from eighth century material. Another partial version of the same story is in the fourteenth century manuscript, the Yellow Book of Lecan, but the most complete and integrated narrative is in the Book of Leinster, and it is the latter which has been most frequently translated. The Ulster Cycle contains the stories which have been most amenable to nationalistic interpretation, for its heroes and heroines, Cuchulain,[1] Deirdre, Fergus, Maeve are highly imaginative creations specifically related to the glories and disasters of a warrior society, and their interdependent tales form one of the most complete vernacular epics in Western literature. The central story, The Tain Bó Cuailnge (according to Thomas Kinsella, its most recent translator) is the nearest to great epic that Ireland has produced.

The Fenian Cycle belongs more to oral tradition. Its stories are still part of folk belief and it is the most popular of the cycles. The tales of Oisin which enjoyed such a remarkable popularity during the eighteenth century were little more than adaptations by James MacPherson of this same Fenian Cycle, which is common to Gaelic peoples in Scotland, Ireland and Wales. In recent Irish literature the most popular stories from this cycle are "The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grania", a tale of fated love and divided loyalties, and "Oisin in the Land of the Young", the adventures of a mortal hero in an immortal world.

The fourth and final group of stories are more closely connected with history. They usually centre on the exploits of early Irish kings. Probably the best known of these stories is that of Dervorgilla and Diarmuid, whose love led to the establishment of the Normans in Ireland. W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory have both written plays based on this semi-historical theme: both The Dreaming of the Bones by Yeats, and Dervorgilla by Lady Gregory are cast as personal and historical tragedies.

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[1] The spelling of names and places in Irish mythology varies considerably. For convenience I have adopted the spelling used by Yeats in the majority of his works, except in cases of direct quotation.

This extensive body of mythical material - which survived orally for generations before it was written down, only to fade into obscurity during the English domination of Ireland - was preserved through the efforts of a few historians and translators. In the seventeenth century Geoffrey Keating collected the old stories into a rough framework. The next work of any significance was Charlotte Brooke's Reliques of Irish Poetry published in 1789. Even though the translations were in many respects inadequate, this book anticipated the beginning of a new cultural nationalism which would replace that which had been submerged by the Cromwellian invasions. Since Irish literature had by this time been effectively destroyed, Reliques of Irish Poetry facilitated the work of more significant figures. In the first half of the nineteenth century this reawakening of cultural nationalism found political expression. During the Young Ireland movement of the 1840's writers such as Thomas Davis, Thomas Moore and James Mangan were utilizing the legendary material as an ostensibly national, even radically political tool. Although W. B. Yeats felt affinities with their nationalistic striving, and their use of tradition to influence the present, he could not wholly sympathize with this Young Ireland movement because of its subservience to politics rather than art. Yeats felt that it "sought a nation unified by political doctrine alone, a subservient art and letters aiding and abetting."[2]

> The writers who made this literature or who shaped its ideals, in the years before the great famine, lived at the moment when the middleclass had brought to perfection its ideal of the good citizen, and of a politics and a philosophy and a literature which would help him upon his way; and they made a literature full of the civic virtues and, in all but its unbounded patriotism, without inconvenient ardours . . . for it was the desire of everybody to be moved by the same emotions as everybody else, and certainly one cannot blame a desire which has thrown so great a shadow of self-sacrifice.[3]

But a generation before the publication of The Spirit of the Nation, the Royal Irish Academy had begun a study of ancient Irish literature and in Trinity College, Dublin, scholars such as John O'Donovan and Eugene O'Curry were respectively collating and translating The Annals of the Four Masters and Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History. Although this early work was severely retarded by the disastrous social conditions of the middle of the century, it provided inspiration for Mangan,

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[2] W. B. Yeats, "Ireland after Parnell", Autobiographies (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 204.

[3] W. B. Yeats, "The Literary Movement in Ireland", Ideals in Ireland, ed. Lady Augusta Gregory (London: Unicorn Press, 1901), pp. 87 & 88.

Ferguson and O'Grady. Ironically, it was the interest of foreign scholars, Jubainville, Thurneysen and Rys, for example, which kept the Gaelic tradition alive during the famine years, as Lady Ferguson pointed out in 1897: "It is hardly to the credit of our countrymen that scholars from France and Germany are more interested in it than we are, and come to Ireland solely for the purpose of its study."[4] And the incipient Romantic movement in England which found affiliations with "Celtic magic and nature" indirectly aroused an interest in Irish folklore and legend which reached Yeats through his contact with the Pre-Raphaelites.

However, Yeats's direct contact with the heroic myths of his country was made through the poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson, which impressed him more for its Celtic flavor than for its artistic merits. Introducing an edition of Ferguson's poetry in 1918, Yeats declared:

> The author of these poems is the greatest poet Ireland has produced, because the most central and most Celtic. Whatever the future may bring forth in the way of a truly great and national literature - and now that the race is so large, so widely spread, and so conscious of its unity, the years are ripe - will find its morning in these three volumes of one who was made by the purifying flame of national sentiment the one man of his time who wrote heroic poetry - one who, among the somewhat sybaritic singers of his day, was like some aged sea-king sitting among the inland wheat and poppies - the saviour of the sea about him and its strength.[5]

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[4] Quoted from Lady Ferguson's Introduction to Samuel Ferguson's Lays of the Red Branch (Dublin: Sealy, Bryers & Walker), p. xvii.

[5] Introduction to Poems by Samuel Ferguson (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1918), p. xxv.

With his colourful, passionate portrayal of the ancient heroes, Ferguson fired the imaginations of others, as the young Yeats recognized:

> Sir Samuel Ferguson's special claim to our attention is that he went back to the Irish cycle, finding it, in truth, a fountain that, in the passage of centuries, was overgrown with weeds and grass, so that the very way to it was forgotten of the poets; but now that his feet have worn the pathway, many others will follow, and bring thence living waters for the healing of our nation, helping us to live the larger life of the Spirit, and lifting our souls away from their selfish joys and sorrows to be the companions of those who lived greatly among the woods and hills when the world was young.[6]

Like Yeats, Ferguson had specific reasons for choosing Irish legendary material as the subject of much of his poetry. He argued that the aim of any civilized nation must be cultural identity, which can be achieved only by the knowledge and acceptance of a common heritage:

> What we have to do with, . . . is the recovery of the mislaid, but not lost, records of the acts and opinions and conditions of our ancestors - the disinterring and bringing back to the light of intellectual day [of] the already recorded facts, by which the people of Ireland will be able to live back in the land they live in, with as ample and as interesting a field of retrospective enjoyment as any of the nations around us.[7]

Early in his life Ferguson concerned himself with everything Irish, music, architecture, annals, laws, antiquities. He aided the Young Ireland movement for a short time, and from

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[6] W. B. Yeats, from The Irish Fireside (1886), quoted from Davis, Mangan, Ferguson?: Tradition and the Irish Writer (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1970), p. 48.

[7] Samuel Ferguson (1840), quoted by Frank O'Connor, The Backward Look (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 150.

1881 was president of the Royal Irish Academy. One of his first publications in the 1830's was entitled The Hibernian Night's Entertainment, a long series of historic tales. His three major works - Lays of the Western Gael (1864), Congal (1872), and Lays of the Red Branch (1897) - were venerated by younger poets, who were inspired by the nobility of the poetry, its passion, imagination and vigor, and the epic largeness of its conception. Ferguson, however, was neglected by the general public, as were others of his conviction such as Standish James O'Grady. Both men felt the need to teach the public the significance of the Irish legends, to lift up Ireland from its intellectual doldrums: Ferguson's business was, "regardless of such discouragement, to do what [he could] in the formation of a characteristic school of letters for [his] own country."[8] He felt that the youth of his time lacked any vital sense of history and tradition:

. . . and the Man aspires
To link his present with his Country's past,
And live anew in knowledge of his sires;

No rootless colonist of alien earth,
Proud but of patient lungs and pliant limb,
A stranger in the land that gave him birth,
The land a stranger to itself and him.[9]

Samuel Ferguson wanted a national literature which was lofty, moral and distinctly Irish, but the raw material with which he had to work was often barbarous and obscene, and he frequently apologizes for the "turgid extravagances and exaggerations" of parts of original texts, which must have been additions of later copyists. In his poem "The Tain-Quest" from Lays of the Western Gael, he accounts for the discrepancy between the glories of the hypothetical original story, and the debased form which survives in the present day. The legend of the Cattle Raid was told to the poet Sanchan's son by Fergus mac Roigh, the poet-warrior of the Red Branch. Ferguson's conception of this hero influenced Yeats, who used Fergus as a symbol of imaginative man in his poems "Fergus and the Druid", and "Who Goes With Fergus?", the dreamer who gave up his throne to pursue the truths of life. In "The Tain-Quest" Fergus as poet retells the lost story only "for the Gael's sake", so that Ireland's great literature will not go unrecognized:

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[8] Poems of Samuel Ferguson, ed. Padraic Colum (Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1963), p. 10.

[9] Ferguson, "Mesgreda", Lays of the Red Branch, p. 33.

> . . . never let the scornful Gauls
> Mongst our land's reproaches reckon lack of
> Song within our halls.10

However, once it has been recited to the court by Sanchan, the tale is cursed by the mistress of his son for the price of strength and youth its recovery has exacted on her lover:

> So it comes, the lay, recover'd once at such a deadly
> cost,
> Ere one full recital suffer'd, once again is all but
> lost:

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[10] Ferguson, "The Tain-Quest", Lays of the Western Gael (Dublin: Sealy, Bryers & Walker, 1888), p. 21.

> For, the maiden's malediction still with many a
> blemishing stain
> Clings in coarser garb of fiction round the fragments
> that remain.[11]

Working on this assumption, that the original versions of the myths were "purer" in form and matter, and have since been debased, Ferguson carefully selects and edits his themes, giving them a decidedly moral perspective and seeing them from the point of view of the incipient coming of Christianity to the pagan world. His heroes, then, like those of Standish O'Grady, are usually conscious creations - exempla for all the virtues which should be apparent in the Irish character. The combined efforts of Ferguson and O'Grady provided Ireland with a mythical hero whose influence on the contemporary politics of Ireland superseded the more aesthetic intentions that Yeats had for him. It was Cuchulain who stood at Pearse's side in the Dublin Post Office when a terrible beauty was born:

> When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side,
> What stalked through the Post Office? What intellect,
> What calculations, number, measurement, replied?
> We Irish, born into that ancient sect
> But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
> And by its formless spawning fury wrecked,
> Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace
> The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.[12]

"The Naming of Cuchullin" from Lays of the Red Branch consciously creates a hero for the Irish. Cuchulain's glorious destiny is prophesied by the Druid Cathbad:

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[11] Ibid., p. 27.

[12] W. B. Yeats, "The Statues", ll. 25-32, The Variorum Edition of the Poems, ed. Allt & Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 610.

> To my ears
> There comes a clamour from the rising years,
> The tumult of a torrent passion-swollen,
> Rolled hitherward; and, mid its mingling noises,
> I hear perpetual voices
> Proclaim to laud and fame
> The name
> Cuchullin!
>
> (p. 10)

Cuchulain's role will be that of a paragon of virtue; he has been transformed from the amorphous amoral demi-god of the annals to a champion of the subjugated, a defender of the nation, a saviour of mankind. He is devoted to vigilance, fidelity and toil, the persecutor of envy and hate, wrong and rapine. It is obvious at this point that Cuchulain, "the pure and stainless son of Dectire", is well on the way to becoming a Christ figure. Standish James O'Grady is also susceptible to this anachronistic process of deification, but it has little influence on subsequent interpreters of myth. The absurd inflation so evident in the early writers is parodied by Joyce in the Cyclops episode of Ulysses. In literature, an excess in emotion or in style generates its own satiric responses.

Ferguson casts "The Naming of Cuchullin" in a dramatic form although the set formal speeches serve more to fill in the details of the story than to characterize the speakers. In his introduction to "Conary" he points to the dramatic quality which he finds inherent in the literature of Celtic Ireland. This dramatic quality is probably due to the fact that the works were originally orally transmitted, and since direct speech interspersed with lyrical verse is easier to recall and more entertaining than strict narrative, the recitations took on a theatricality which they have not entirely lost in the subsequent redactions and transcriptions. Ferguson's impressions were shared by many others who followed him:

> The theatre appears to have been unknown among the early Irish; but no one can peruse the bardic tales without being struck by the dramatic form of their construction. . . . The dialogue often carries on the action independently of the narrative.[13]

It is not surprising, then, that Ferguson should choose to dramatize his version of the Deirdre legend. He calls his work a "Monodrame": there is more than one actor, but the action is unbroken. His is the first dramatic version of this best known of Irish stories, although there were several previous translations. James MacPherson's version is entitled Darthula and R. W. Joyce had cast the story in the form of medieval romance in which Gaelic heroes are metamorphosed into fairy knights of Arthurian vintage. Ferguson adheres fairly closely to the manuscript stories of the sons of Usnach, continually padding out his minimal story with explanations of characters and circumstances which he assumes are completely foreign to the general public. When he diverges from his sources he always has a moral intent:

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[13] Lays of the Red Branch, p. 93.

the longest digressions are Deirdre's debates with Fergus's two sons Illan and Bruno, on the subjects of love, trust and honour. Naisi delivers a lengthy speech on the value of trust, the weighty cadences of the blank verse echoing the more oratorical of Shakespeare's moral diatribes:

> Man lives by mutual trust. The commonwealth
> Falls into chaos if man trust not man.
> For then all joint endeavours come to nought,
> And each pursues his separate intent,
> Backed by no other labour than his own.
> Which confidence, which bond of social life,
> Is bred in some of just experience,
> Of oaths and terror of the Gods in some,
> But, in the most, of natural honesty
> That God has planted in the breast of man,
> Thereby distinguishing him from the beasts.[14]

However, it is Deirdre who expresses the dominant theme in the poem, that love is self-sufficient and all-subsuming: "Its own fulfillment is love's world to love". Yeats develops a similar interpretation of the legend to a more complex and universal significance in his play of Deirdre, without the didactic strain which is so evident in Ferguson. But it is probable that Yeats was influenced by Ferguson's Deirdre, since he considered it the best of Ferguson's poems, and was particularly moved by Deirdre's final lament: even Tennyson's Idylls do not contain this "beauty at once feminine and heroic". Ferguson is more like the Greek epic poets, "for his spirit had sat with the old heroes of his country. In 'Deirdre' he has restored to [the Irish] a fragment of the buried Odyssey of Ireland."[15] At this point, before he wrote his own version of the legend, Yeats is also aware of the limitations of a specifically national mythology, a factor which he must overcome in his own work:

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[14] "Deirdre", Lays of the Red Branch, p. 68.

> But as Lord Tennyson's ideal women will never find a flawless sympathy outside the upper English middle class, so this Deirdre will never, maybe, win entire credence outside the limits - wide enough they are - of the Irish race.16

Despite his moral preoccupations, Ferguson does feel a need to adhere to the substance of the original manuscript material, especially when facts which are integral to the understanding of whole cycles are in question:

> It is no answer to say these things are intrinsically jejeune, or ugly, or barbarous. . . . Much of the material of the best classic literature is as crude and revolting, as anything in Irish or in Welsh story. Raw material, however, to be converted to the uses of cultivated genius, is not all that we might reasonably hope for from such sources. There are ways of looking at things, and even of expressing thought, in these deposits of old experience, not to be lightly rejected by a generation whose minds are restless with unsatisfied speculation, and the very clothing of whose ideas begins to show the polish of threadbareness as much as of culture.17

Hence Ferguson is not as inhibited by the story of Emain Macha as is Lady Gregory, who accounts for the weakness which annually incapacitates the warriors of the Red Branch with a vague reference to a mist sent by the Tuatha de

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[15] Yeats, from The Dublin University Review (1886), Tradition and the Irish Writer, p. 34.

[16] Ibid., p. 37.

[17] Introduction to Lays of the Red Branch, pp. xix & xx.

Danaan, instead of coming to terms with their cruelty to Macha while she was carrying a child. Ferguson does tell the complete story of "The Twins of Macha" with dignity and clarity, although he refrains from elaborating on the nature of the curse, the pains of childbirth which the Red Branch must suffer annually. He is as honest in his approach to the Gaelic myths as his moral and religious bias will allow. More important, he is one of the first Irish poets to give a shape to the amorphous body of manuscript material, thus rendering it accessible to more ambitious writers. His hope is that within ten years of his death "the whole bulk of the old native Irish literature will be in the hands of scholars all over the world". He bequeaths to others the duty and the reward of making the voice of a despised people heard high on Olympus.[18]

By the end of the century, several literary societies were actively engaged in the study of Gaelic myth. W. B. Yeats was in frequent contact with the most prominent members of these societies, among whom were George Sigerson, Standish James O'Grady, Douglas Hyde,[19] T. W. Rolleston and Alfred Nutt.

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[18] *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.

[19] Hyde's interests lay more with the present cultural needs of Ireland, with the dissemination of Gaelic and the translation of Gaelic folk literature into a rhythmical, colloquial English which approximated the cadences of the original language, and which influenced the styles of both

Nutt, editor of a periodical Popular Studies in Mythology, Romance and Folklore, who was actively pursuing analogies to Irish myth in Greek and Arthurian material, invited Yeats to make a translation of the stories of the Red Branch heroes. Yeats declined, considering the task too demanding on his time, thus leaving the way open for Lady Gregory. Nutt was among the first of several literary critics who attempted to prove that Celtic mythology was the prototype of other more recent myths. For example, he argued that symbols of the Grail Quest derived from stories of the Tuatha de Danaan, and from the voyages of early Irish heroes. In fact, Nutt and, later, A. C. L. Brown and R. S. Loomis saw the entire Arthurian cycle in terms of Celtic myth, the central hero of which is Cuchulain, a sun hero. Their convoluted semantic arguments were an attempt to raise what were considered inconsequential stories to a position of importance in world mythology.

The works of Standish James O'Grady were the final catalyst which gave to the growing interest in Irish myth the necessary momentum to produce significant art. But he affected Ireland through others rather than directly, for his works were never widely read by the general public, and

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Lady Gregory and J. M. Synge. When he became embroiled in the Gaelic League and in Irish politics, Yeats considered him lost to literature: "the Harps and Pepperpots got him". (Autobiographies, p. 218) the hero that he helped to recreate did not live for the Irish until he was reincarnated in Pearse. George Russell was one of the few who detected O'Grady's importance:

> O'Grady said of the ancient legends of Ireland that they were less history than prophecy, and I who knew how deep was Pearse's love for Cuchulain whom O'Grady discovered or invented remembered after Easter Week that he had been solitary against a great host in imagination with Cuchulain.[20]

Standish O'Grady was born in 1846, a significant year in Irish history since it also saw the worst of the potato famine and the birth of Parnell. Although he studied for law, his early interest in Greek tragic and lyric poets influenced the direction which his more literary inclinations took him, and, after accidently discovering an early Irish history by O'Halloran when he was twenty-four, he saw in the stories of Irish kings and battles the grandeur of Greek epic. His interest aroused, O'Grady disinterred Eugene O'Curry's Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish and Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish Poetry from the Royal Irish Academy. In this material he found sufficient inspiration to write extensive works of his own, as he explains in a fragment of autobiography printed in a literary supplement to The Irish Homestead in 1899:

> Here, owing to the numerous and often lengthened quotations in which [O'Curry] indulged, I was introduced for the first time, to the wonder-world of Irish heroics and romantic literature. That, indeed, was a revelation.

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[20] AE: The Living Torch, ed. Monk Gibbon (New York: Macmillan, 1938), p. 144.

> Theories concerning ancient Irish history, Nemedian, Firbolgic etc. I then dropped absolutely and went into the literature itself, whenever I could find it, in the 'New Atlantis', in the 'Revue Celtique', in the publications of the Ossianic Society. . . . I had not gone far before I discovered that the Tuatha De Danan, whom I had heretofore regarded as a race of conquerers as historical as the Normans, were in fact the gods of the Pagan Irish, and that of course the races preceding them, Partholanians etc., were of the same nature, and represented more primitve divine dynasties.[21]

Although he had met Samuel Ferguson at Trinity College previous to this discovery, O'Grady knew him only as a hospitable gentleman, not as a poet who was deeply concerned with Irish legends. At this point Ferguson's work was known only to a few admirers, for his poetry lacked the driving zeal necessary to inflame a wider enthusiasm. Recognizing this, O'Grady wrote his own prose in a manner designed to awaken his countrymen to the grandeur of their ancient literature. He also had a more specifically social purpose in mind. O'Grady was a political idealist who saw in the Irish aristocracy a way to save Ireland from the slough of mediocrity into which she had fallen. But at the same time he realized that his Protestant Ascendancy class was deficient in both stature and power. It was under a "Great Enchantment", falling ignobly from social grace without "piteous dirge or one mournful melody" to lament its passing:

> Aristocracies come and go like waves of the sea; and some fall nobly and others ignobly. As I write, this

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[21] Standish O'Grady, quoted from Introduction by Earnest A. Boyd to Selected Essays and Passages (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1918), p. 4.

> Protestant Anglo-Irish aristocracy, which once owned all Ireland from the centre to the sea, is rotting from the land in the most dismal farce-tragedy of all time, without one brave deed, without one brave word.22

O'Grady must then inspire his compatriots with the heroic fervor of the past, to save Ireland from the mercenary grasp of Britain, and the decadent democratic principles of the Republicans. He was, according to Lady Gregory, a "Fenian Unionist". Despite his despair over the state of his country he never lost his sense of patriotism, his belief in the ultimate triumph of his race:

> He somewhat distrusted democracy, and he hated vulgarity, but to him humanity was as one family, and he wrote of the Irish multitude with a sympathy and understanding, and preferred to dwell on our national virtues rather than on those faults of which we hear so much.23

Yeats met O'Grady at the National Literary Society in Dublin, and thought him "all passion and all judgment": "his rage was a swan song over all that he had held most dear, to whom for that reason every Irish imaginative writer owed a portion of his soul."[24] O'Grady zealously dedicated himself to the service of his country, and continually reaffirmed his faith in Ireland's heroic heritage:

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[22] Standish O'Grady, "The Great Enchantment", Ideals in Ireland, ed. Lady Gregory, p. 82.

[23] Hugh Art O'Grady, Standish James O'Grady: the Man and the Writer (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1929), p. 27.

[24] Autobiographies, p. 220.

I give my heart to thee, O mother-land,
I, if none else, recall the sacred womb.
I, if none else, behold the loving eyes
Bent ever on thy myriad progeny
Who care not nor regard thee as they go,
O tender, sorrowing, weeping, hoping land!
I give my heart to thee, O mother-land. 25

With these ambitions, O'Grady wrote his first works on Irish antiquity: History of Ireland I: The Heroic Period, published in 1878; and History of Ireland II: Cuculain and his Contemporaries, published in 1880. The complete public apathy on the subject was apparent from the beginning of his project; he had to publish his Histories himself, and then he recalls in the autobiographical sketch in The Irish Homestead that he was "a good deal laughed at." This did not bother him so much as the fact that so few people bought the book. Like Ferguson he realized that he had to create an interested public, to gradually educate it to the pleasures of the stories of Irish heroes, for "until this mass of information is popularized, and by being popularized, secured and appropriated, it is unlikely that any new surge of antiquarian enthusiasm will again ruffle the tranquil mind of the intellectual classes in Ireland."[26] Among those who did read his first works, however, were the writers who developed into the artistic core of the Irish Renaissance,

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[25] From Introduction to Selected Essays, p. 19.

[26] Standish O'Grady, Introduction to History of Ireland I, 1898 (rpt. New York: Lemma, 1970), p. v.

W. B. Yeats, John Todhunter, Eleaner Hull, George Russell, and Lady Gregory. O'Grady's total conception of heroic Ireland and in particular his depiction of a national hero in Cuchulain opened up a new area of imaginative experience to be explored. The interest of this group encouraged London publishers to ask O'Grady for more Irish heroic stories. He responded with several volumes of romances, *Cuculain: An Epic* (1882), an abridgement of *History of Ireland I*; *Finn and his Companions* (1892), a children's story which for some reason particularly impressed Yeats; and a trilogy on the life of Cuchulain, *The Coming of Cuculain* (1894), *In the Gates of the North* (1901), and *The Triumph and Passing of Cuculain* (1920). The last three books were obvious attempts to popularize the stories of the *Histories* which had fallen on deaf ears. The style is more colloquial, less rhetorical and inflected. The exuberant, barbaric spirit of the original mythic material is completely lost in these idealized adventures. O'Grady himself realizes how much he has modified his original grandiose attitude, and even indulges in self-parody in his introduction to *In the Gates of the North* to illustrate the necessity of "descending" to the level of the common public:

> I knew a man who delighted much to express himself with a certain amplitude and stateliness of diction, and rejoiced greatly when his words seemed to strike the ear with a sound like the measured tread of marching men.[27]

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[27] Standish O'Grady, Introduction to *In the Gates of the North* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1901), p. v.

O'Grady warns that the reader must be prepared to discipline his reading, but the initial effort will be duly rewarded, for Irish bardic literature is "a great intellectual treasure stored away in the deep places and guarded recesses of the soul."[28]

Despite the subsequent attempts at popularization, it was O'Grady's first two publications, History of Ireland, Volumes I and II which had the most significant impact on the form and tone which Irish myth took in the early years of the Irish Renaissance. He gave the vague figures of narrative and poetic fragments credibility and authenticity, and raised them to the heroic status which was to serve as an example of generosity, nobility, and leadership for the Irish ascendancy. O'Grady never doubted the moral or literary value of the manuscript stories, once they had been expurgated of any corrupt additions by later chroniclers, and shaped by a critical spirit: "A noble moral tone pervades the whole. Courage, affection, and truth are native to all who live in this world."[29] He sees in this material the history of the Irish race; he continually emphasizes the validity and artistry of his sources:

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[28] Ibid., p. xiii.

[29] Introduction to History of Ireland II, 1880 (rpt. New York: Lemma, 1970), p. 43. It is obvious here how much O'Grady's wishful thinking has distorted the text.

> To all great nations their history presents itself under the aspect of poetry; a drama exciting pity and terror; an epic with unbroken continuity, and a wide range of thought.30

The stories are not creations of an idle fancy, but are inextricably tied down to the landscape of Ireland, its mountains, lakes, and archeological remains.

On the other hand, O'Grady repudiates any idea that he is presenting simply the dry bones of a great civilization. His history is infused with the light of the imagination; the facts are seen through the eyes of an artist. In his approach to the raw material, O'Grady continually vacillates between the demands of scholarly authenticity and the temptation towards imaginative embroidery.[31] Despite his repeated protestations as to the historical truth of his works, he changes the whole character of the originals, deleting important details which offend his moral sensibility, and even adding sections to build up the heroic past he wishes to present. His method, then, is to reconstruct "by imaginative processes the life led by our ancestors in this country."[32] History must be sympathetic, imaginative and

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[30] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

[31] Phillip L. Marcus discusses this polarity in his excellent work, *Standish O'Grady* (Lewisburg: Bucknell U. Press, 1970), p. 19 ff.

[32] Introduction to *History* I, p. v.

creative. O'Grady criticizes the methods of his predecessors as being too scientific and unimaginative. Keating believed that the ancient bardic lore represented pure historic fact and set down in chronological order the kings and heroes of Ireland. O'Curry lacked any unifying principle: his works are a welter of detail and fragmented episodes. O'Grady outlines his own more liberal treatment which allows for considerable authorial intervention for aesthetic purposes:

> The treatment which I have myself adopted consists in the reduction to its artistic elements of the whole of that heroic history taken together, viewing it always in the light shed by the discoveries of modern archeologians, frequently using the actual language of the bards, and as much as possible their style and general character of expression. . . . I have endeavored to trace the mental and physical personality of the heroes and heroines in their essential elements. . . . Hence it follows, that in order to be faithful to the generic conception, one must disregard often the literal statement of the bard. That the whole should be fairly represented, one must do violence to the parts upon which, no more violence can be wrought than they inflict upon one another, perpetually diverging in detail, though in unison generally as to the main idea of characters and events.[33]

O'Grady's assumption about the organic unity of the legends is completely erroneous, of course; the point of view, the moral tone which he finds pervades the whole, is simply his own creation. Similarly, there is no "bardic style". O'Grady's rolling rhetoric represents for him a style appropriate to the heroic stature of the material. Moreover, he is consciously creating an epic from the fragmentary originals and employs several epic devices to heighten the tone of the whole, and to give it a sense of structure. However, many of his epic similes unintentionally fall into the mock heroic because of their over-inflation:

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[33] Introduction to History I, p. x.

> Like a bright star, when the wind is high, revealing and concealing itself, a moment seen, and then again deep-buried in the driving clouds, Cuculain is revealed and hidden, crossing the spaces of the bardic sky, ere attaining the region where he blazes out with surpassing splendour, dimming all the lesser lights in that heroic age.[34]

O'Grady maintains the divinely inspired bardic stance throughout, trying to give the illusion of objectivity by a frequent use of set speeches and unimpassioned cataloguing. One of the most obvious examples of his pompous attitude to the great epic he is writing is found at the beginning of Chapter XV, "The Kings of Dinn Rie", where he tells how he will tone down the heroic tale to epic proportion and reasonableness. This claim is followed by an invocation to his bardic ancestors:

> Spirits of the ancient bards, my ancestors, and ye sacred influences that haunt for ever the soil and air of my country, nameless now and unworshipped, but strong and eternal, be with me and befriend, that in circles worthy so glorious singing their praise upon whom nations looked back as upon their first and best, with a flight unfailing I may rise to regions where no wing of laborious ollav or chanting shanachie ever yet fanned that thinner air.[35]

At this point it is difficult not to believe that O'Grady is mocking his own enthusiasm for his subject.

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[34] History of Ireland I, p. 130.

[35] Ibid., pp. 48-49.

O'Grady claims nevertheless that he is still trying to maintain the illusion of historical truth, and to curb the flights of imagination to which he is prone. Thus in the extensive introduction to History of Ireland II, which he had published previously under the title of Early Bardic Literature, he reaffirms his role as historian, seeing "historic fact . . . through the eyes of a loving wonder."[36] Cuchulain and his friends are not "literary phantoms but actual existences; imaginary and fictitious characters, . . . do not live and flourish so in the world's memory."[37] His epic and dramatic interest had assumed control of Volume I; in Volume II he establishes the historical framework again by giving in a dry factual form a chronology of the early inhabitants of Ireland down to the death of Cuchulain. When O'Grady assumes this historical stance, his work suffers. He is at his best when completely absorbed in the stories.

With this emphasis on imaginative truth, O'Grady comes close to realizing the mythical quality of the old stories. He does in fact discuss them in terms of myth, which he sees as a way of apprehending reality:

> The legends represent the imagination of the country; they are that kind of history which a nation desires to possess. They betray the ambition and ideals of the people, and in this respect, have a value far beyond the

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[36] Introduction to History II, p. 31

[37] O'Grady, Preface to The Coming of Cuchulain (London: Methuen, 1894), p. 9.

> tale of actual events. Nay too they have their own reality. They fill the mind with an adequate and satisfying pleasure. They present a rhythmic completeness and a beauty not to be found in the fragmentary and ragged succession of events in time.38

O'Grady, however, has a tendency to blur mythical truth with historical truth, and he uses the term "myth" uneasily, as if it prejudices his case for veracity:

> Doubtless the legendary blends at some point with the historic narrative. The cloud and mist somewhere condense into the clear stream of indubitable fact. But how to discern under the rich and teaming mythus of the bards, the course of that slender and doubtful rivulet, or beneath the piled rubbish and dust of the chroniclers, discover the tiny track which elsewhere broadens into the highway of a nation's history.39

The myths of Ireland are firmly rooted in the history of the race and the land; they are "believed in as history never consciously invented, and [grow] out of certain spots of the earth's soil like a natural growth."[40] W. B. Yeats also saw that Irish legends conveyed a strong impression of specific locality, and in his early poems, in particular, he fostered this sense of place. In his later plays, however, he placed his mythic characters in a timeless, spaceless dimension, in an attempt to achieve a wider frame of reference. O'Grady preferred a more limited nationalistic interpretation, which stayed clear of any connotations of dream or fantasy.

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[38] History I, p. 22.

[39] Ibid., p. 24.

[40] Introduction to History II, p. 7.

He readily places the theogonies of Ireland in the more fantastical world of mythology, however, where he can safely discuss the supernatural Tuatha de Danaan and their predecessors, the Nemedian gods, the Fomorians and the Firbolgs. His treatment of the "semi-historic and mythological periods" is rather cursory. He obviously prefers to tackle a more rational human level of being:

> I regret that I have not time or space to treat of the mythological period at length. Mythology, treated succinctly, is ridiculous; treated at length and with sympathy, it may, or ought to be, sublime. Grecian mythology in Keightley is absurd, but in Hesiod, Aeschylus, and Sophocles inspires awe.[41]

Greek myth becomes a convenient touchstone for the meaning and credibility of Irish myth. O'Grady explains the Tuatha de Danaan by comparing them to individual Greek gods: Angus Og is like the Greek Eros; Lu Lamfada like Apollo; Mananaan like Poseidon. His heroic Ireland is like Homer's Greece:

> In the dawn of the history of all nations we see this deceptive light, these glorious and unearthly shapes; before Grecian history, the gods and demigods who fought around Illium; before Roman, the strong legends of Virginius and Brutus; in the dawn of Irish history the Knights of the Red Branch.[42]

But he idealizes his heroes far beyond those of the Iliad, carried away by his own visions of the glorious past:

> As in some bright young dawn, over the dewy grass, and in the light of the rising sun, superhuman in size and

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[41] History II, p. 90.

[42] History I, p. 22.

> beauty, their long, yellow hair curling on their shoulders, bound around the temples with torcs of gold, clad in white linen tunics, and loose brattas of crimson silk fastened on the breast with huge wheel-brooches of gold, their long spears musical with running rings, with naked knees, and bare crown, they cluster around their kings, the chieftains and knights of the heroic age of Ireland.[43]

In his efforts to reinstate Irish myth in the national consciousness, he often loses all sense of proportion, to the point where he can maintain that the Irish heroic legends surpass those of Greece:

> An Irish bias may possibly affect my judgment in this matter, though I should be sorry, indeed, that truth should, in any way and for any object, suffer through this cause, but I cannot help regarding this age and the great personages moving therein as incomparably higher in intrinsic worth than the corresponding ages of Greece. In Homer, Hesiod, and the Attic poets, there is a polish and artistic form, absent in the existing monuments of Irish heroic thought, but the gold, the ore itself, is here massier and more pure, the sentiment deeper and more tender, the audacity and freedom more exhilarating, the reach of imagination more sublime, the depth and power of the human soul more fully exhibit themselves.[44]

O'Grady's Histories of Ireland attempt to reinvigorate the national spirit of Ireland by providing an inspiring prototype. The heroic age was a creation of the Irish mind when the imagination was aflame, and "the national idea had laid hold upon the Irish mind. It was a single nation that inhabited all Ireland and the west of Scotland, and tributary to a single chief. This was the age in which were created the national heroes of ancient Eiré. . . ."[45] The Irish legends describe the growth to nationhood of a group of warring tribes: "the chaos of confusion and aimless strugglings concentre gradually into the wise and determined action of a nation fulfilling its part in the great national confraternity of the world."[46]

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[43] History I, p. 21.

[44] O'Grady, "Cuculain, Son of Sualtam", Selected Essays and Passages, p. 88.

O'Grady's national hero is Cuchulain, epitomizing physical beauty, generosity, hospitality, love of family and nation. He bears little resemblance to the barbaric, superhuman hero of the Tain, for O'Grady emphasizes the human qualities of his hero, the virtues which all Irishmen can emulate. "It is the profound and vital humanity of [Cuchulain's] career, even more than his greatness which touches and stirs the reader."[47] O'Grady does not hesitate to falsify details which he finds too irrational or barbarous for modern taste. In the original Tain, Cuchulain at five years old has the sexual and physical prowess of a man. He learns the arts and crafts of a warrior under Scáthach at age seven, seduces her daughter, and then courts and marries Emer. O'Grady disregards this incredible childhood sexual precosity, enumerating only Cuchulain's boyhood feats of arms. Moreover, he totally disregards one of Cuchulain's salient

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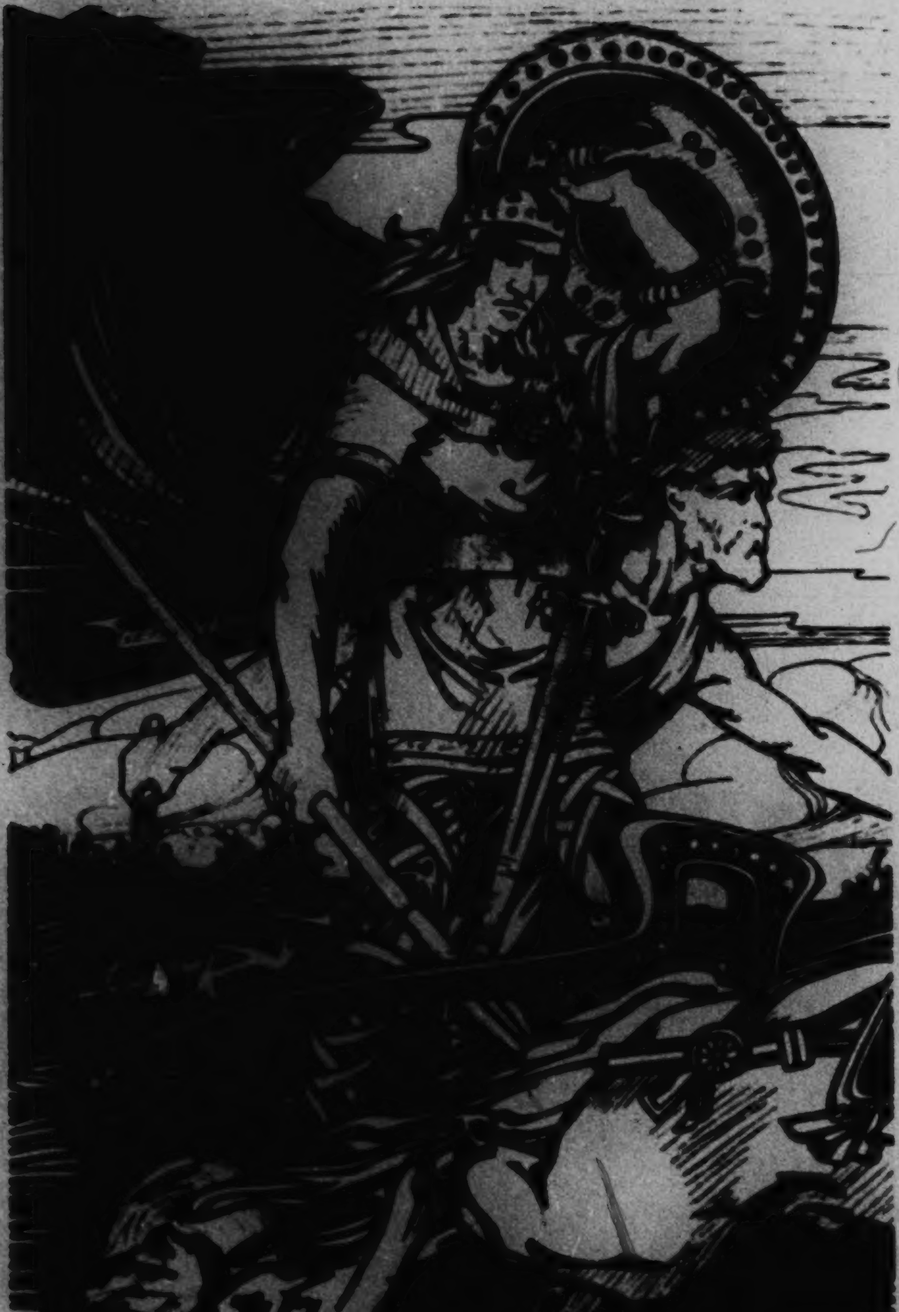
[45] History I, pp. 23-24.

[46] History I, p. 39.

[47] Selected Essays, p. 90.



Cuchulain in the Battlefield

"The noble steeds flew along nor needed at all
the scourge of the charioteer."

characteristics, the "warp-spasm", a physical and mental distortion which O'Grady finds incompatible with his heroic ideas of beauty. Thomas Kinsella's recent translation depicts this frenzy which overcomes Cuchulain before a fight in the graphic manner of the original source:

> The Warp-Spasm overtook him; it seemed each hair was hammered into his head, so sharply they shot upright. You would swear a fire-speck tipped each hair. He squeezed one eye narrower than the eye of a needle; he opened the other wider than the mouth of a goblet. He bared his jaws to the ear; he peeled back his lips to the eye-teeth till his gullet showed. His hero-halo rose up from the crown of his head.[48]

Cuchulain's great beauty is also emphasized in the Tain; but it is a supernatural, exaggerated beauty:

> You would think he had three distinct heads of hair - brown at the base, blood-red in the middle, and a crown of golden yellow. This hair was settled strikingly into three coils on the cleft at the back of his head. Each long loose-flowing strand hung down in shining splendour over his shoulders, deep-gold and beautiful and fine as a thread of gold. A hundred neat red-gold curls shone darkly on his neck, and his head was covered with a hundred crimson threads matted with gems. He had four dimples in each cheek - yellow, green, crimson and blue - and seven bright pupils, eye-jewels, in each kingly eye. Each foot had seven toes and each hand seven fingers, the nails with the grip of a hawk's claw or a gryphon's clench.[49]

The women climb on the shoulders of their men to see his dazzling beauty, when he appears before the armies of Maeve. But O'Grady de-emphasizes Cuchulain's physical appeal and depicts him in terms of his moral virtues, his chivalry, courtesy, nobility and generosity. His conduct is the epitome of "courtoisie". Even when the forces of the hated Maeve are routed, Cuchulain guards her retreat. O'Grady's footnote to this incident is typical of his naive evasion: "The chivalrous actions recorded of Cuchulain are innumerable."[50] In Kinsella's more literal translation of The Tain, Cuchulain overtakes Maeve when she is incapacitated by menstruation, and refrains from slaying her only because he will not strike her from behind.

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[48] Thomas Kinsella, The Tain (London: Oxford U. Press, 1970), p. 77.

[49] Ibid., pp. 156 & 158.

In an attempt to reinforce Cuchulain's chastity, O'Grady provides his hero with a happy home life, fabricating scenes of touching domesticity and love, which have no foundation in the manuscript stories. Cuchulain's only son is by an Amazon mistress, Aiofe, not by Emer, and there is no record of a daughter. He also inserts a thinly veiled allegorical account of Cuchulain's trip to ancient Dublin, Ath-a-Cliah, where he finds himself in striking contrast to the ignoble and impoverished city-dwellers:

> So through the city of Ath-a-Cliah walked the heroes; and Cuculain was dejected when he looked upon the people, so small were they, and so pale and ignoble, both in appearance and behaviour; and also when he saw the extreme poverty of the poor, and the hurrying eager crowds seeking what he knew not. But they, on the other hand, were astonished at the heroes, the greatness of their stature, the majesty of their bearing, and their tranquility; also, at the richness and brightness of their long hair, parted in the middle and rolling over their shoulders. For, amongst the citizens of Ath-a-Cliah they seemed like scions of some mighty and divine race long since passed away.[51]

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[50] History II, p. 282.

[51] History II, pp. 291-292.

Cuchulain is then, for O'Grady, the supreme Irish hero, fierce defender of the nation and succour of the weak. Although O'Grady minimizes any allusions to supernatural or incestuous parentage, he does tend to build up the Christ-like attributes of his hero, particularly in association with his affliction and death. In the first instance, Cuchulain is left alone in great anguish to endure torments of the spirit such as Christ suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane. Even O'Grady's style has a Biblical tone:

> So in his agony Cuculain . . . lifted up his voice, and the men of Maeve heard him, for he said that he was forsaken, and all men leagued against him. Moreover, as the moon set, he saw faces that moved among the trees mocking him, and horrid things, formless and cold, estrays out of the fold of hell . . . and all the sweet chords of his mind were torn or unstrung, and the Shee delivered him over to great affliction.52

Significantly, Cuchulain is watched over for three days and nights by his faithful charioteer, Laeg. His battles against the Clan Cailitin are battles against the dark forces of hell, and his death is seen by Emer as the extinction of light, and the triumph of darkness and the grave. At his death, "the sun darkened, and the earth trembled, and a wail of agony from immortal mouths shrilled across the land,"[53] and he is visited by a child who reassures him that evil will triumph "but for a time."

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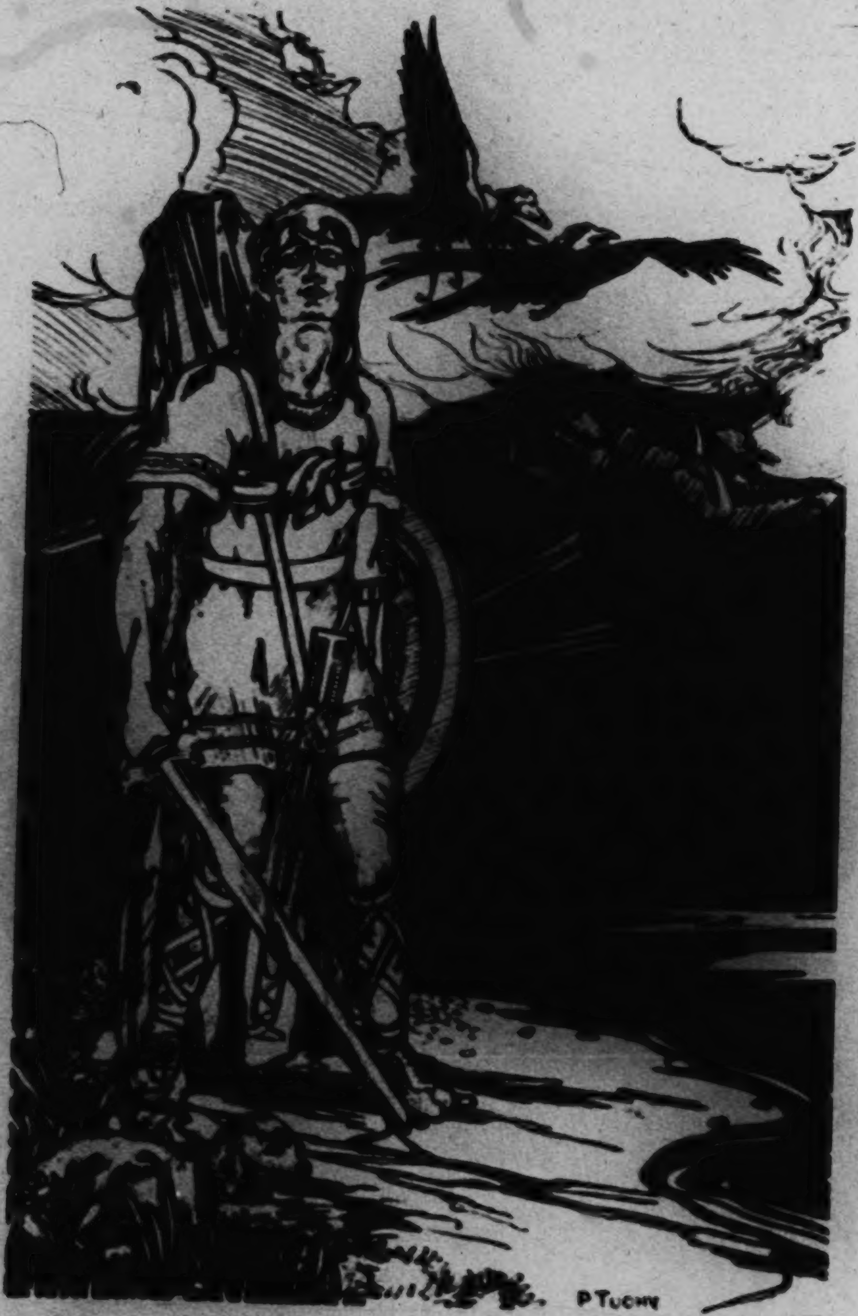
[52] History I, p. 229.

[53] History II, p. 342.



The Death of Cuchulain

"So stood Cuculain, even in death's pangs a terror to his enemies and the bulwark of his nation."

This prefiguration of Christ is not out of keeping with the monastic insertions in the manuscripts, but it does undercut the validity of the heroic pagan world which O'Grady is trying to portray. To turn Cuchulain into a Christian hero is to give the whole epic tale a totally alien perspective.

Because he is preoccupied with the presentation of an Irish hero, O'Grady gives short shrift to stories which have since captured the public imagination. He ignores the morally dicey legend of Diarmuid and Grania altogether, and gives only cursory treatment to the Deirdre story. The narration is strictly objective, without undue sympathy for the dilemmas of any of the protaganists. He dwells on the beauty of Naoise and Deirdre, which provides him with ample opportunity for extravagant description, but the moral point of view comes through Conchubar, as it does in AE's dramatic version. Angry because his decrees have been violated, the High King emphasizes the importance of chastity, and the danger of lawlessness. The final battle, which later adapters like James Stephens build into an exciting climax, O'Grady dismisses with a few terse sentences:

> But Concobar MacNessa seized Deirdre and Naysi, Anly and Ardan, and he slew the children of Usna, and Illan the Fair, and many of the Clan Usna, and despised the protection of Fergus MacRoy.[54]

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[54] History I, p. 119.

Obviously this is not the version which subsequently inspired Yeats, Synge and Russell.

O'Grady seems generally unsympathetic to the heroines of Ireland. His attitude to Maeve, that tall warrior goddess who led her armies against Cuchulain is often disparaging, and contrasts markedly with Yeats's use of Maeve as an image of heroic beauty. Through the mouth of Fergus, O'Grady voices anti-feminist views about the woman's domestic role and what disasters ensue when she meddles in the world of men. Not only is Maeve unfit to lead her armies, but she is cunning and vindictive, bent on the destruction of Cuchulain at any cost. O'Grady's attitude is not always hostile, however, for Maeve is also a part of the heroic age he wishes to glorify, and thus, as a queen, cannot be presented as completely ignoble. His sweeping moral generalizations must also include Maeve, and he rarely misses a chance to teach a lesson in virtue and generosity. Despite the fact that the Cattle Raid started with an argument over possessions between Maeve and Ailell, O'Grady can maintain that "in the days of Maeve, the great knights and champions of Eire concerned themselves more with knightly deeds and thoughts, and relinquished to the base born excessive zeal concerning wealth and its distribution. . . . The whole of the heroic literature is tuned to this generous note, as if wealth were dross, to be flung abroad, and lavished and despised."[55]

Since this grand heroic past was such a repository of virtues, it must not be degraded by any ignoble treatment. O'Grady feared that further adaptations of the stories would only debase them, even though he himself continued to popularize the stories in a romance form remote in spirit and in substance from the originals. He was particularly apprehensive about dramatic representation, and in 1902 issued a warning in the All Ireland Review to those playwrights who might be tempted to stage the legends:

> The Red Branch ought not to be staged. . . . That literature ought not to be produced for popular consumption for the edification of the crowd. . . . I say to you drop this thing at your peril. . . . You may succeed in degrading Irish ideals, and banishing the soul of the land. . . . Leave the heroic cycles alone, and don't bring them down to the crowd.56

O'Grady's arrogant aristocratic stance was refuted by W. B. Yeats and George Russell, both of whom were experimenting at this time with Irish myth in the Literary Theatre. Now that the heroes of the past were again current, it would be impossible to protect them from any less noble treatment than was accorded them by O'Grady. According to AE, their intrinsic qualities could not be debased by subsequent interpretation, and they would continue to uplift and inspire. What he failed to understand was that

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[55] History II, pp. 170-171.

[56] Quoted from George Russell, Imagination and Reveries (Dublin: Maunsel, 1915), p. 7.

O'Grady's eulogistic attitude towards his heroes would be in itself an occasion for satirical and farcical versions. Ironically, those who attempted to preserve O'Grady's grand style were those who undercut the credibility of the myths.

Despite his vocal apprehension, O'Grady himself subsequently attempted a dramatic version of the Fianna stories in 1907, which he entitled The Masque of Finn. Indeed he contends in a Preface to the play that the stories of Finn are suited to masque having, like Comus, supernatural elements, and being "of a generally open air character". The masque falls into three episodes, none having any relation to the others, except for their common characters, the heroes of the Fianna. The dialogue is a stilted attempt at dignified speech, the characters are wooden and predictable, and the events are little more than thinly veiled moral or political allegory. Finn is another version of the deliverer figure: in Part I, "The Coming of Finn", Crimall, the old chief of the exiled Fianna prophesies Finn's coming with "a high and resolute aspect":

> Not for nothing, brave remnant, have you followed so faithfully the cause of great Clan Basna, and kept alive in Erin the spirit of rebellion against tyrants. We are outlaws and hunted indeed and shorn of our strength, but we are here, and unsubdued. The deliverer is at hand.[57]

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[57] Standish O'Grady, "The Masque of Finn", Finn and His Companions (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1921), p. 21.

O'Grady makes every detail childishly clear to his audience so that there can be no chance of misinterpretation. Part II, "The Redemption of Nod", is a lesson in the heroic virtues of generosity and hospitality, the conversion of a wealthy miser through the all-wise judgment of Finn, who is "ever just, and the chief pillar and defender of right against wrong in all Erin today".[58] Like Cuchulain, Finn in the hands of O'Grady becomes another Christ-like paragon of Irish manhood:

> Such a one as he there has not been, nor will there be till the world's end. The wisdom of the ancient times is in him and the wisdom of times to come. Sage, seer, poet, prophet, yet a man moving amongst men, kind, gentle, considerate, and compassionate.[59]

Finally, in Part III, "The Transformation of Finn", the hero does achieve immortal status, having been lured into the Ocean of Humanity where he learns the sorrows of mankind. Until the Irish saviour does come, Finn will suffice as an inspiration and guide:

> Prince of hunters, feasters, fighters,
>    Seek thee nobler spheres of fame,
> Be the heart and soul of Erin,
>    Be the manhood of the Gael.
>
> Let thy Spirit with their Spirit
>    Mingle till some mighty birth,
> Brings the Irish hero saviour
>    Of the nations of the earth.[60]

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[58] Ibid., p. 39.

[59] Ibid., pp. 68-69.

[60] Fairy's Song, "The Masque of Finn", p. 83.

The sentiments here are the height of preposterous chauvinism and the masque as a whole an inconsequential exercise in morality, but "The Transformation of Finn" does show how absurd O'Grady's idealizations can become. In this respect he puts Irish mythology in a vulnerable position, and leaves it open for facile exploitation. In fact, O'Grady himself is mildly satirized in a play by Edward Martyn and George Moore, The Bending of the Bough.[61] The protagonist, Jasper Dean, functions as the voice of idealism in the play, but the pretentious statements about "the sacredness of the land underfoot . . . the birthplace of noble thought, heroism and beauty, and divine ecstasies",[62] undermine any serious consideration of his ideas. Sean O'Casey makes much better use of the positive ideals of Irish myth through the Second Workman in Purple Dust than do Martyn and Moore through Jasper Dean; however, in both cases there is a fine line between irony and idealism.

Although Standish O'Grady's enthusiasm for his subject often led him into absurdities, his idealism did have a significant impact on the literary minds of his time. He caught a spirit of awakening nationalism in the figure of Cuchulain, and expressed it with such enthusiasm that his hero became the hero of the Irish political and dramatic movements at the turn of the century. AE's enthusiastic introduction to O'Grady's works indicates the impact which the latter had on artists eager for Irish raw material with which to work:

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[61] The Bending of the Bough was produced by the Irish Literary Theatre together with Alice Milligan's The Last Feast of the Fianna and Edward Martyn's Maeve, at the Gaiety Theatre in 1900.

[62] George Moore, The Bending of the Bough (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1900), p. 58.

> When I close my eyes and brood in memory over the books which most profoundly affect me I find none excited my imagination more than Standish O'Grady's epic narrative of Cuchulain. . . . With reference to Ireland, I was at the time I read, like many others who were bereaved of the history of their race. I was a man who through some accident, had lost the memory of his past. . . . When I read O'Grady I was as such a man who suddenly feels ancient memories rushing at him. . . . It was the memory of race which rose up within me as I read, and I felt exalted as one who learns he is among the children of kings. That is what O'Grady did *for* me and for many others who were my contemporaries. . . . In O'Grady's writings the submerged river of national culture rose up again a shining torrent, and I realized as I bathed in that stream that the greatest spiritual evil one nation could inflict on another was to cut off from it the story of the national soul.[63]

O'Grady's second volume of *History of Ireland*, and Ferguson's *Collected Poems* were both published in 1880, a logical date to establish as the beginning of the Celtic Revival in Ireland. But it was primarily the efforts of Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory which propelled the movement into the twentieth century by providing the raw material of myth which Yeats drew upon for the poetry and plays.

The importance of Lady Gregory to a literary and dramatic movement with its roots in traditional and national values has only been recognized in the last few years. After her death in 1932, her work suffered an eclipse and her name was resurrected only in relation to Yeats and the founding of the Irish Literary Theatre. But besides her sacrificial efforts for theatrical affairs in Ireland, and besides her prolific dramatic output, Lady Gregory contributed to the movement by solidifying folk and heroic legends into works which would provide the raw material for artists of greater stature to realize themselves. Although her mythological and folk narratives, her plays, journals and histories are creditable works in their own right, it is because she is linked so integrally with artists who provided a more universal form for her nationalist preoccupations that she is discussed in relation to Yeats, Synge and O'Casey.

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[63] Peter Kavanagh, *The Story of the Abbey Theatre* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1950), p. 8. No date is given for the quotation.

Certainly Lady Gregory draws the substance of her work primarily from the soil of Ireland, and this has been her limitation as well as her strength. The epigram to Poets and Dreamers, taken from a poem by Walt Whitman, is an indication of her interests:

> Will you seek afar off? You surely come back at last,
> In things best known to you finding the best,
> or as good as the best;
> In folks nearest to you finding the sweetest,
> strongest, lovingest;
> Happiness, knowledge not in another place but this place -
> not for another hour but this hour.[64]

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[64] Lady Gregory, Poets and Dreamers: Studies and Translations from the Irish (New York: Kennikat Press, 1967), no page.

Augusta Persse was born at Roxborough, one of sixteen children. Not surprisingly she had little contact with her mother, and was brought up primarily by her nurse Mary Sheridan, an Irish-speaking peasant who was a repository of fairytales and folklore. Lady Gregory's propensity for the heroic as well as the folk area of experience was early reflected in her love of Malory. Another early relationship may also have influenced her interest in Irish myth: her friend Enid Layard was the daughter of Lady Charlotte Guest, who translated the Mabinogion. After marrying into the social world of the Gregory's, Augusta began her writing career by composing political pamphlets. She decided to learn Irish with her son Robert and borrowed an old Gaelic Bible from Edward Martyn for this purpose. The publication of Yeats's The Celtic Twilight and Hyde's Love Songs of Connacht, both in 1893, encouraged her to collect folk tales from her own native Galway, and she subsequently published several volumes of folk stories and translations: Poets and Dreamers (1903), A Book of Saints and Wonders (1907), The Kiltartan Poetry Book (1918), The Kiltartan History Book, and the largest and most ambitious publication, Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland (1920). It was from these stories that she drew the material for most of her plays, and she always had the theatre in mind when collecting any of her prose works, for, like Yeats, she was consciously creating a tradition. To share in the literary movement of the time, she invited its more prominent members to Coole, where there developed a veritable Irish "salon". Lady Gregory helped to keep these various talents in a cohesive group, and provided the strength of will necessary to keep the literary movement percolating:

> They came like swallows and like swallows went,
> And yet a woman's powerful character
> Could keep a swallow to its first intent;
> And half a dozen in formation there,
> That seemed to whirl upon a compass point,
> Found certainty upon the dreaming air,
> The intellectual sweetness of those lines
> That can cross time and cut it withershins.[65]

Lady Gregory helped to bring back Yeats to the firmer soil of Ireland when he felt himself lost on the path of Hodos Chameliontos, providing at Coole both a refuge and an inspiration for his art. After wandering through the vagaries of the occult, Yeats re-established a kinship with the elemental stirrings of his country, which he expressed in In the Seven Woods (1902):

> I have heard the pigeons of the Seven Woods
> Make their wild thunder, and the garden bees
> Hum in the lime-tree flowers; and put away
> The unavailing outcries and the old bitterness
> That empty the heart. I have forgot awhile
> Tara uprooted, and new commonness
> Upon the throne and crying about the streets
> And hanging its paper flowers from post to post,
> Because it is alone of all things happy.66

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[65] Yeats, "Coole Park", ll. 17-24, The Variorum Edition of the Poems, ed. Alt & Alspach, p. 489.

[66] Yeats, "In the Seven Woods", ll. 1-9, Variorum Poems, p. 198.

Coole brings back the heroic age for Yeats, conjuring up images of mythical figures; it constitutes a transition between the sensuous and immortal worlds:

> I had not eyes like those enchanted eyes,
> Yet dreamed that beings happier than men
> Moved round me in the shadows, and at night
> My dreams were cloven by voices and by fires;
> And the images I have woven in this story
> Of Forgael and Dectora and the empty waters
> Moved round me in the voices and in the fires.
>
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
>
> Do our woods
> And winds and ponds cover more quiet woods,
> More shining winds, more star-glimmering ponds?
> Is Eden out of time and out of space.[67]

George Moore, in his own flippant way, also sees Coole as a literary hive of activity:

> In years to come Coole will be historic; later still, it will be legendary, a sort of Minstrelburg, the home of the Bell Branch Singers. . . . We shall all become folklore in time to come, Finns and Diarmuids and Usheens, every one of us, and Lady Gregory a new Niamh.[68]

It was at Coole that the idea for the Literary Theatre took shape, and Lady Gregory was instrumental in writing its manifesto in 1898:

> We propose to have performed in Dublin, in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions

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[67] Yeats, Dedication to Lady Gregory of "The Shadowy Waters", "I walked Among the Seven Woods of Coole", Variorum Poems, p. 217.

[68] George Moore, Hail and Farewell: Ave (London: William Heinemann, 1927), p. 344.

> of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in the theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism.69

This theatre would provide the opportunity for Yeats to stage his projected plays on Irish mythology, and was to bring the noblest of Ireland's traditions to the people, but Lady Gregory was always wary of overblown idealism:

> I myself never quite understood the meaning of the "Celtic Movement", which we were said to belong to. When I was asked about it, I used to say it was a movement meant to persuade the Scotch to begin buying our books, while we continued not to buy theirs.70

Although she had taken little interest in drama heretofore, Lady Gregory quickly learned the arduous business of stagecraft, and even appeared on the stage herself as Cathleen ni Houlihan when circumstances required it. Not only did she give advice to aspiring playwrights, she collaborated with Yeats on several of his early plays, particularly in matters of characterization and dialogue. From her contact with the people of Galway county, she had developed a rhythmical colloquial style of writing which combined the grace of poetry with the homeliness of common speech. This "Kiltartan dialect" enriched The Pot of Broth, Cathleen ni Houlihan and Unicorn from the Stars, and heightened

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[69] Lady Gregory, Our Irish Theatre (London: Putnam, 1913), pp. 8 & 9.

[70] Our Irish Theatre, p. 9.

the raciness and humour of her own plays. Lady Gregory's plays show a surprising variety of subject and method, from tragedy to Wonder play, but she is remembered primarily for her folk plays, the one-act incidental pieces which were originally intended to balance the more austere tragedies offered by Yeats, and fill up an evening's entertainment. Ironically enough, her plays proved more popular than Yeats's to the point where the Abbey gradually took on the character of a folk theatre. Lady Gregory's heroic ambitions for Ireland found expression through peasant humour. In Dramatis Personae Yeats underlines this paradox: "Lady Gregory, in her life much artifice, in her nature much pride, was born to see the glory of the world in a peasant mirror."[71] The motto which she adopted shows her desire to communicate to a wide public: "To think like a wise man but to express oneself like the common people." Yeats did not foresee her talents as a playwright, although he warmly acknowledged her works on Irish legend:

> I no more foresaw her genius than I foresaw that of John Synge, nor had she herself foreseen it. Our theatre had been established before she wrote or had any ambition to write, and yet her little comedies have merriment and beauty, an unusual combination. . . .72

Lady Gregory, however, modest though she was about her dramatic efforts, did not think of them as inconsequential:

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[71] W. B. Yeats, Dramatis Personae (London: Macmillan, 1936), p. 75.

[72] Autobiographies, pp. 380-81.

"To have real success and to come into the life of the country, one must touch a real and eternal emotion."[73] What she tried to capture in her comedies were the salient characteristics of the Irish people, particularly their incorrigible habit of myth-making. The best of her plays are in a sense mythopoeic, in the same way that Synge's are mythopoeic, capturing the exuberant, expansive spirit of the Irish. In her experiments with historical and legendary material, she is less successful; the familiar peasant idiom and boisterous humour are foreign to the heroic world of Dervorgilla and Grania.

In a more indirect but none the less influential way Lady Gregory's translations and adaptations of the Irish myths, Cuchulain of Muirthemne (1902) and Gods and Fighting Men (1904), were a contribution to theatre in Ireland. She came to this material not through the scholarly routes of O'Grady but through oral tradition, and this perhaps accounts for the accessibility and fluidity of her translations:

> And so I came by the road nearest me to the old legends, the old heroic poems. It was a man of a hundred years who told me the story of Cuchulain's fight with his own son. . . . Deirdre's beauty, that brought the Sons of Usnach to their death, comes into many of the country songs. Grania of the yet earlier poems is not so well thought of.[74]

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[73] Our Irish Theatre, p. 91.

[74] Lady Gregory, The Kiltartan Poetry Book (Churchtown: Cuala Press, 1918), p. vii.

In Dramatis Personae[75] Yeats recounts in detail how she became the "founder of modern Irish dialect literature." He had been approached by Alfred Nutt to make translations of the best of Irish heroic cycles, "attempting what Malory had done for the old French narratives." When he rejected the proposal, Lady Gregory offered to take it over, spurred on by her indignation over the dismissal of Irish literature as silly or indecent by a Committee on Education. She undertook in this, as in all her work, to add dignity to Ireland.

Lady Gregory was by no means original in her choice or arrangement of the stories; she closely followed the sources of Eleanor Hull. Her unique contribution to Anglo-Irish literature was through style. The archaic flavour of the Kiltartan idiom is particularly fitted to the evocation of ancient times: the tone of the whole is stately, yet colloquial. Nor does she hesitate to add to or subtract from the texts to make a homogeneous narrative. Thomas Kinsella justifiably describes her works as being more like adaptations than translations, but they remain the best versions of the Irish myths despite their disregard for scholarly accuracy. And they did reach a wide public, each book going into four editions by World War I. In contrast, Standish O'Grady's works, which made a stronger impact on the early movement, have fallen into obscurity since the turn of the century.

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[75] Dramatis Personae, pp. 73-74.

Lady Gregory's use of the Kiltartan idiom particularly impressed Yeats, who originally had few expectations that she would succeed in such a massive undertaking, while J. M. Synge found in this dialect a vehicle for his peasant drama:

> The rich, abundant speech of the people was a delight to him. When . . . Cuchulain of Muirthemne came out, he said to Mr. Yeats he had been amazed to find in it the dialect he had been trying to master. He wrote to [Lady Gregory]: "Your Cuchulain is part of my daily bread."76

Yeats saw Lady Gregory's heroic works as being at the centre of the Irish Renaissance, and his praise reflects his pride in her achievement:

> If she had not found those tales, or finding them had not found the dialect of Kiltartan, the past could not, as it were, have drawn itself together, come to birth as a present personality.77

In the poet's view they are better than the Mabinogion, are almost the Irish Morte d'Arthur, its Nibelungenlied. He claims in his introduction that Cuchulain of Muirthemne is the "best [book] to come out of Ireland; for the stories it tells are the chief part of Ireland's gift to the imagination of the world - and it tells them perfectly for the first time."[78]

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[76] Our Irish Theatre, p. 124.

[77] Dramatis Personae, p. 74.

[78] Lady Gregory, Cuchulain of Muirthemne (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smyth, 1970), p. vii.

This is the definitive version. He cannot believe that anybody will need another text than this, a work which is "half epical, half lyrical, like that of the historical parts of the Bible." Even by 1922, Yeats has modified his enthusiasm only slightly; while still acknowledging the debt he owes Lady Gregory for her popularization of Irish myth, he does point out that most of his heroic plays were written or conceived before her work was published. She has created an audience for his drama, not directly inspired it:

> The greater number of the stories I have used, and persons I have spoken of, are in Lady Gregory's Gods and Fighting Men and Cuchulain of Muirthemne. If my small Dublin audience for poetical drama grows to any size, whether now or at some future time, I shall owe it to these two books, masterpieces of prose, which can but make the old stories as familiar to Irishmen at any rate as are the stories of Arthur and his Knights to all readers of books. I cannot believe that it is from friendship that I weigh these books with Malory, and feel no discontent at the tally, or that it is the wish to make the circumsubstantial origins of my own art familiar, that would make me give them before all other books to young men and girls in Ireland. I wrote for the most part before they were written, but all, or all but all, is there.79

George Russell is no less prophetic in his review of Cuchulain of Muirthemne in 1902. Irish youth will come to recognize through Lady Gregory's translations the embodiment of Ireland's archetype in its myths:

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[79] W. B. Yeats, Note (1) The Legendary and Mythological Foundation of the Plays, Plays in Prose and Verse (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 417.

> Lady Gregory, a fairy godmother, has given to Young Ireland, the gift of her Cuchulain of Muirthemne, which should be henceforward the book of its dream. I do not doubt but there will be a great change in the next generation, for the character of many children will have grown to maturity brooding upon the memories of heroes who were themselves half children half demigods. Though the hero tales will have their greatest power over the young, no one mind could measure their depth. They seem simple and primitive, yet they draw us strongly aside from life, and the emotions they awaken are not simple but complex.[80]

James Joyce found such eulogies of Lady Gregory's work disproportionate and satirizes the whole Literary Theatre cult in Ulysses through the mocking words of Buck Mulligan to Stephen Dedalus:

> - Longworth is awfully sick, he said, after what you wrote about that old hake Gregory. O you inquisitional drunken jew jesuit! She gets you a job on the paper and then you go and slate her drivel to Jaysus. Couldn't you do the Yeats touch?
>
> He went on and down, mopping, chanting with waving graceful arms:
>
> - The most beautiful book that has come out of our country in my time. One thinks of Homer.[81]

Lady Gregory was well aware of Joyce's denigration of "that mumming Company", and of his dissociation from the movement, but this did not undermine her complete dedication to the cause of the Irish theatre and the arts, to which all else must be subservient. She considered her own translations as raw material for drama, although she was not contemptuous of personal fame. In the notes to Gods and Fighting Men she outlines the ambitious purposes of her two works: to bring Irish literature to the public and to show it full of imagination and life; to demonstrate the enduring belief in an invisible world and an immortal life behind the visible and mortal; and to stimulate scholarship. Unlike O'Grady, Lady Gregory rules out any historical authenticity and declines to date any of her stories. She tries to express the *imaginative* quality of Irish literature, believing that it can both teach and delight. In her dedication of *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* to the people of Kiltartan, she explains her method, making no apologies for her liberal treatment of the sources. Her business is to entertain:

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[80] George Russell, "The Character of Heroic Literature", Imaginations and Reveries, p. 1.

[81] James Joyce, Ulysses, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969 [1922]), p. 216.

> It is what I have tried to do, to take the best of the stories, or whatever parts of each will fit best to one another, and that way to give a fair account of Cuchulain's life and death. I left out a good deal I thought you would not care about for one reason or another, but I put in nothing of my own that could be helped, only a sentence or so now and again to link the different parts together. I have told the whole story in plain and simple words, in the same way my old nurse Mary Sheridan used to be telling stories, from the Irish long ago, and I a child at Roxborough.
>
> And indeed if there was more respect for Irish things among the learned men that live in the college at Dublin, where so many of these old writings are stored, this work would not have been left to a woman of the house, that has to be minding the place and listening to complaints, and dividing her share of food.[82]

Lady Gregory has been accused of prudery in her editing of the manuscript material; her alterations or omissions make no basic difference to the general outline of the stories, although they sometimes change the tone. Unlike O'Grady she does not de-emphasize the supernatural elements: the immortal and mortal worlds are interpenetrable and an atmosphere of fantasy predominates. Thus in the "Birth of Cuchulain", the mysterious siring of the hero is left unexplained, and the reader can only assume that Lugh of the Long Hand entered Dechtire in the form of a mayfly. It is this fluctuating world of gods and men which so appealed to Yeats, for it invites imaginative interpretation.

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[82] *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, p. 5.

Lady Gregory is much more objective in her presentation of events than is Ferguson or O'Grady, and rarely draws didactic conclusions. Her account of Cuchulain's naming and of Cathbad's prophecy provides a striking contrast to the bombast of Ferguson's poem:

> "And from this out," [Cathbad] said, "your name will be Cuchulain, the Hound of Culain." "I am better pleased with my own name of Setanta, son of Sualtem," said the boy. "Do not say that," said Cathbad, "for all the men in the whole world will some day have the name of Cuchulain in their mouths." "If that is so, I am content to keep it," said the boy. And this is how he came by the name of Cuchulain.[83]

Such an uninflected approach invites the more personal interpretations of others, and several stories from Cuchulain of Muirthemne and Gods and Fighting Men did find their way into the theatre.

The origins of "Bricrui's Feast" and "The Championship of Ulster" are more clearly defined than most Celtic legends, and there are many analogues in British folklore which tell of a beheading game. That most formidable of Celtic scholars, R. S. Loomis, maintains in Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance[84] the prototypal story was an Irish one. The god who challenges the heroes to a beheading contest is Curoi, porter of the Other World, and his fortress is the archetypal Grail Castle. Consequently, Loomis sees Cuchulain as the original Grail Hero, who undergoes many ordeals at the castle of Curoi to prove his worthiness. A literary offshoot of this legend of "Bricrui's Feast" is Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

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[83] Cuchulain of Muirthemne, p. 28.

In her version of the myth, Lady Gregory downplays the gruesome and violent details, dwelling more on the moral and physical superiority of Cuchulain, but her account of the trials of Laegaire, Conall and Cuchulain at the hands of Maeve and then Curoi is brisk and colourful. She portrays the monster Uath in the amplified, grotesque style of fairy-tale:

> As they were sitting there towards evening, and the day wearing to its close, they saw a big awkward fellow, very ugly, coming to them into the hall. It seemed to them as if none of the men of Ulster could reach to half his height. He was frightful to look at; next his skin he had an old cow's hide and a grey cloak around him, and over him he had a great spreading branch the size of a winter shed under which thirty cattle could find shelter. Ravenous yellow eyes he had, and in his right

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[84] R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance (New York: Columbia U. Press, 1927).

> hand an axe weighing fifty cauldrons of melted metal, its sharpness such that it would cut through hairs, if the wind would blow them against its edge.[85]

Uath proves to be but a distorted image of Curoi, who has changed into this form for the purpose of the beheading test. Lady Gregory successfully combines homely detail with the strangest manifestations of the supernatural in her version of the legend of "The Champion's Portion" and gives it the color of Arthurian myth by drawing subtle parallels between Bricrui and Mordred, between the twelve heroes of Ulster and the Knights of the Round Table. Her story admirably illustrates the properties of myth, which may be defined as an imaginative embodiment of the rationally inexplicable.

In his dramatic version of the legend, The Green Helmet, Yeats simplifies and stylizes even more the details of Lady Gregory's narrative. Curoi, for example, becomes an imposing giant, who provides the final definition of Cuchulain's heroic nature. Yeats's interest lies in the symbolic potential of the material and in the nature of Cuchulain as a mythical hero.[86]

Lady Gregory's version of "The Fate of the Children of Usna" impressed both Yeats and Synge, and there are distinct correlations between the translation and their dramatic representations. As Elizabeth Coxhead points out in her book, Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait,[87] Lady Gregory has a closer affinity with the stories of women, and becomes more imaginatively involved. Again she gives her story literary weight with echoes of Greek myth: Deirdre is the Irish Helen, whose beauty occasioned the destruction of cities. Moreover, Cathbad's lyrical prophecy at her birth also tells of her immortality through myth and legend:

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[85] Cuchulain of Muirthemne, pp. 73-74.

[86] For a fuller discussion of The Green Helmet, see Chapter III.

> "O Deirdre, on whose account many shall weep, on whose account many women shall be envious, there will be trouble on Ulster for your sake, O fair daughter of Fedlimid.
>
> "Many will be jealous of your face, O flame of beauty: for your sake heroes shall go to exile. For your sake deeds of anger shall be done in Emain; there is harm in your face, for it will bring banishment and death on the sons of kings.
>
> "In your fate, O beautiful child, are wounds, and ill-doings, and shedding of blood.
>
> "You will have a little grave apart to yourself; you will be a tale of wonder for ever, Deirdre."88

As in Synge's play, Deirdre grows up under the guidance of Levarcham to be a child of nature, hidden away from the world. When Conchubar learns of her beauty from a hunter, he sets out to court her "in the fresh spring morning of the fresh and pleasant month of May," (p. 96) the favorite season for love trysts in Malory. He brings her back to Emain

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[87] Elizabeth Coxhead, Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait (London: Secker & Warburg, 1966).

[88] Cuchulain of Muirthemne, p. 93. All subsequent quotations from the story are taken from this text.

Macha to be educated, and here Deirdre sees Naoise, Ainnle and Ardan, not in her secluded hut as in the plays of AE and Synge. Moreover, Lady Gregory's Deirdre is a strong-willed girl who takes the initiative in the love affair, gathering up her skirts to pursue the three men. In Kinsella's more literal translation of The Tain Deirdre is equally strong-minded, compelling Naoise to take her away from Conchubar, as Grania does Diarmuid in the Finn Cycle.

The chess game which provides Yeats with a central symbol of fate in Deirdre is a simple narrative detail in Lady Gregory's story. However, she does modify the objectivity of the narration enough to allow for occasional nationalistic sentiments. Naoise is anxious to return to his native land despite the evil omens Deirdre has seen:

> "It will be safe indeed," said Naoise, "and we will go with you to Ireland; and though there were no trouble beneath the sun, but a man to be far from his own land, there is little delight in peace and a long sleep to a man that is an exile. It is a pity for the man that is an exile; it is little his honour, it is great his grief, for it is he will have a share of wandering."
>
> (p. 102)

In Synge's play, it is Deirdre who finally decides to return, although her reasons are not so clearly defined, as they are expressions of the vicissitudes of her character and less obviously nationalistic.

Lady Gregory's Conchubar is not the sympathetic old man of Synge's play, nor AE's just king, but more like Yeats's version, an authoritative and strong ruler, aloof from fine moral or emotional concerns. Neither Yeats nor Lady Gregory dwells on the heroic nature of Naoise; both subordinate his character to that of Deirdre. In fact, Lady Gregory relates how, when death is imminent, he appeals to Conchubar for protection.

Lady Gregory's lyrical version of Deirdre's final lament expresses the essence of the tragedy of the Children of Usnach. Synge's play evokes a similar mood of poignant lyricism. However, he sustains the impact of the tragedy better than does Lady Gregory. Her story trails off in inconsequential detail instead of ending with the high point of Deirdre's death, so that much of the emotional impact is dissipated. Lady Gregory prefers a clean heroic death for her heroine, as do most of the subsequent interpreters of the story. Thomas Kinsella, however, refuses to deny the more barbarous elements of The Tain: after the slaying of Naoise by Eogan, Deirdre is kept a year by Conchubar, and then sent over to Eogan because she hates him as much as she does Conchubar:

> They set out the next day for the fair of Macha. She was behind Eogan in the chariot. She had sworn that two men alive in the world together would never have her.
>
> "This is good, Deirdriu", Conchobar said. "Between me and Eogan you are a sheep eyeing two rams."
>
> A big block of stone was in front of her. She let her head be driven against the stone, and made a mass of fragments of it, and she was dead.[89]

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[89] T. Kinsella, The Tain, p. 20.

The story of "The Only Jealousy of Emer" in Cuchulain of Muirthemne relates how Cuchulain expiates a crime against the Sidhe by defending the goddess Fand from the people of Manannan. His exploits in the world of the immortals constitute a welter of names and details which even Lady Gregory's clearly defined prose cannot satisfactorily untangle. Yeats's radically condensed play, The Only Jealousy of Emer, ignores this maze of detail, although it assumes a knowledge of Lady Gregory's story. Yeats uses the myth as a vehicle for his own theosophical ideas and theories of beauty. Fand symbolizes ideal female beauty in the play; in Lady Gregory's story she incarnates the intangible purity and beauty of the gods:

> And the meaning of the name Fand is a tear that passes over the fire of the eye. It was for her purity she was called that, and for her beauty; for there was nothing in life with which she could be compared besides it.
> (p. 216)

Emer emerges in both versions as the typical strong-minded woman of Irish saga. By strength of will alone she arouses Cuchulain from his sickbed. In Lady Gregory's story, however, her opponent is Fand rather than Eithne Inguba. When Emer learns of Cuchulain's love for Fand, in a jealous rage she attempts to kill the woman of the Country-Over-Wave, and is prevented from doing so only by Cuchulain's intervention. The quarrel between Emer and Cuchulain provides a novel view of male-female relations:

> "I ask you, Emer," said Cuchulain, "Why I may not have my turn in the company of this woman; for in the first place she is well-behaved, comely, well-mannered, worthy of a king. . . . And O Emer," he said, "you will never find any brave, comely man so good as myself."
> "It is certain," said Emer, "that I will not refuse this woman if you follow her." (p. 220)

Although the account of such an incredible proposal appears detached and objective, it is obvious that Lady Gregory's sympathies lie more with the heroine than with the hero.

In his Notes to On Baile's Strand, Yeats states that he founded his play on Old Irish Prose Romances, but it is possible that the extensively revised version of the original play owes something to Lady Gregory's translation of "The Only Son of Aoife". Certainly there is a correlation between the emotional crises of both, and Lady Gregory hits upon the heart of the tragedy in Cuchulain's lyrical outbursts of grief when he learns that he has killed his own son. As in Yeats's play his grief is doubly poignant because he has no living descendent, no means to ensure his immortality through his offspring:

> "Without a son, without a brother, with none to come after me; without Conlaoch, without a name to keep my strength."
>
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
>
> "I am the father that killed his son, the fine green branch; there is no hand or shelter to help me."
> "I am a raven that has no home; I am a boat going from wave to wave; I am a ship that has lost its rudder; I am the apple left on the tree; it is little I thought of falling from it; grief and sorrow will be with me from this time." (p. 241)

The theme of blindness, which so predominates in Yeats's play, is also touched on here: Cuchulain thinks of himself as blinded after his son's death and after his moral defeat through the machinations of Aoife. His final fight with the waves suits Yeats's purposes for the death of a tragic hero, but Lady Gregory clears up the ambiguity which surrounds Cuchulain's demise. In so doing she undercuts any possibility of climax for her story:

> Then he fought with the waves three days and three nights, till he fell from hunger and weakness, so that some men said he got his death there. But it was not there he got his death, but on the plain of Muirthemne. (p. 241)

Yeats's dramatization of The Death of Cuchulain is perhaps the most personal of his theatrical experiments, and as such departs radically from Lady Gregory's account. Apart from Cuchulain, none of his players figure in the prose story; only the barest outlines of plot remain to link it with the older stories. Cuchulain's determination to face the impending battle despite repeated bad omens is the same in both the play and the story, as is his concern for immortality through the greatness of his name. However, Lady Gregory gives a stirring account of the last battle, while Yeats almost completely eliminates physical action. He is more interested in psychic events, and moreover he is limited by the exigencies of the stage. Instead he gives the details of the battle through the words of the Morrigu in a ritualistic chant at the end. It is Lugaid who takes Cuchulain's head in the prose version, but it suits Yeats's symbolic purposes to substitute for Lugaid an anti-heroic blind man. Lady Gregory's account is naively factual; she adheres to the objectivity of myth. Nowhere does she indulge in the tragic posturing of O'Grady, but by the same token she loses some of the emotional potential of the episode by dwelling simply on external details, and refraining from any kind of internalization:

> Then Lugaid threw the spear, and it went through and through Cuchulain's body, and he knew he had got his deadly wound; and his bowels came out on the cushions of the chariot, and his only horse went away from him. . .
>
> Then he gathered up his bowels into his body, and he went down to the lake. He drank a drink, and he washed himself, and he turned back again to his death, and he called to his enemies to come and meet him. . . .
>
> Then Lugaid came and lifted up Cuchulain's hair from his shoulders, and struck his head off, and the men of Ireland gave three heavy shouts, and the sword fell from Cuchulain's hand, and as it fell, it struck off Lugaid's right hand, so that it fell to the ground. Then they cut off Cuchulain's hand, in satisfaction for it, and then the light faded away from Cuchulain's head, and left it as pale as the snow of a single night.
>
> (p. 256)

The emotional release comes through Emer's complaint; she bestows upon Cuchulain the immortality of the mythical hero before lying down beside him in the same grave. Lady Gregory's reference to his immortal stature in Ireland is understated, but nevertheless is an attempt to dispel any finality in Cuchulain's death:

> But the three times fifty queens that loved Cuchulain saw him appear in his Druid chariot, going through Emain Macha; and they could hear him singing the music of the Sidhe.
>
> (p. 263)

The stories of Gods and Fighting Men have proved less amenable to dramatic representation, with the exception of the legend of Diarmuid and Grania, which attracted such playwrights as W. B. Yeats, Austin Clarke, Michéal MacLiammoir and Maurice Meldon.[90] However, certain mythical heroes and gods in Lady Gregory's work did reach the consciousness of dramatists such as Sean O'Casey and Denis Johnston, whose art is basically antipathetic to the idealizations of Irish myth.

Lady Gregory makes no claim to historical authenticity in Gods and Fighting Men, and presents all events and characters in the context of imaginative reality. Yeats recognizes her mythical propensity in his Preface to the work and predicts that many writers will find ample material for their art in this mythical world, where the mortal and immortal interpenetrate:

> We think of [Finn] and of his people as great-bodied men with large movements, that seem, as it were, flowing out of some deep below the narrow stream of personal impulse, men that have broad brows and quiet eyes full of confidence in a good luck that proves every day afresh that they are a portion of the strength of things. They are hardly so much individual men as portions of universal nature, like the clouds that shape themselves, and reshape themselves

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[90] See Appendix A.

> momentarily. . . and yet this but brings them the nearer to us, for we can remake them in our image as we will, and the woods are the more beautiful for the thought.[91]

In this fluctuating world, men are the "foaming tide-line" of the immortal sea, and they practise the simple virtues of courtesy and friendship. Their characters and deeds provide moral edification, a heroic ideal which is still deeply rooted in the peasant culture. In his Preface, Yeats indicates that Lady Gregory's desire to reunite the ancestral and peasant cultures is the same as his own:

> If we would create a great community - and what other game is so worth the labour? - we must recreate the old foundations of life, not as they existed in the splendid misunderstanding of the eighteenth century, but as they must always exist when the finest minds and Ned the beggar and Sean the fool think about the same thing, although they may not think the same thought about it.[92]

Because of Lady Gregory's colourful treatment of the Tuatha de Danaan, the gods of Ireland subsequently became current material for modern Irish drama. In Gods and Fighting Men she provides detailed accounts of Lugh of the Long Hand, the father of Cuchulain and Master of all Arts; Manannan, who built invisible walls around the Tuatha de Danaan when they were defeated in battle by the Gauls; the Morrigu, goddess of discord and death; Dagda, the king of the gods; and Angus Og, his son, god of love and beauty and the arts:

> And he was a beautiful young man with high looks, and his appearance was more beautiful than all beauty, and

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[91] W. B. Yeats, Preface to Gods and Fighting Men (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1970), p. 13.

[92] Yeats, Preface to Gods and Fighting Men, p. 19.

> there were ornaments of gold on his dress; in his hand he held a silver harp with strings of red gold, and the sound of its string was sweeter than all music under the sky; and over the harp were two birds that seemed to be playing on it.[93]

Lady Gregory also recounts the story of Midhir and Etain, which Michéal MacLiammoir adapted forty years later for his play, Where Stars Walk.

In Part II, "The Fianna", Lady Gregory sets down in clear and concise form the stories of Finn, Oscar and Oisin, gathering the divergent folk legends into unified episodes. Although these stories lack, as Yeats points out, any epic continuity, they still convey a spontaneity and imaginativeness which invite artistic treatment. One of the most beautiful of the stories, "The Call of Oisin", describes the Country of the Young, or Tir na nOg. Lady Gregory's lyrical portrayal of the land where Niamh takes Oisin on her white steed compares with Yeats's poem on the same subject:

> "It is the country is most delightful of all that are under the sun; the trees are stooping down with fruit and with leaves and with blossom.
>
> "Honey and wine are plentiful there, and everything the eye has ever seen; no wasting will come on you with the wasting away of time; you will never see death or lessening.
>
> (p. 333)

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[93] Lady Gregory, Gods and Fighting Men (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1970), p. 83. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

Lady Gregory is less successful with the story of Diarmuid and Grania, and even Yeats finds it diffuse and discursive, probably because he had already found it a difficult dramatic proposition:

> Even Diarmuid and Grania, which is a long story, has nothing of the clear outlines of Deirdre, and is indeed but a succession of detached episodes.
>
> (Preface, p. 14)

The legend of the pursuit of Diarmuid and Grania by the vengeful Finn is structurally episodic, a long series of close escapes with the help of Diarmuid's patron god, Angus Og. The salient events,[94] Grania's desertion of Finn for Diarmuid, her initiative in forcing Diarmuid to take her away, the loyalty of Diarmuid towards Finn, the final betrayal of faith, and Diarmuid's last fight with the Boar of Ben Bulben, are those which remain clearest in the popular imagination, and are those which are most amenable to dramatic adaptation. But Lady Gregory weighs down the main line of the narrative with cumbersome detail and fails to achieve a clear conception of the protagonists. There is no attempt at internalization or exploration of motive: like Tristan and Isolt, Grania falls in love under the power of a charm, Diarmuid's love-spot. Diarmuid is forced by his geasa to obey Grania's demands, and continually laments his past life and comrades.[95] After a violent argument, they succumb to passion and Diarmuid breaks his faith with Finn. Lady Gregory's treatment of this episode is strictly in keeping with propriety:

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[94] This story, of course, invites comparison with that of Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere.

[95] His laments become the subject of satire in Meldon's Aisling.

> They came then to a place where there was a cave, and water running by it, and they stopped to rest; and Grania said: "Have you a mind to eat bread and meat now, Diarmuid?"
>
> "I would eat it indeed if I had it", said Diarmuid.
>
> "Give me a knife, so", she said, "till I cut it."
>
> "Look for the knife in the sheaf where you put it yourself", said Diarmuid.
>
> She saw then that the knife was in his thigh where she had struck it, for he would not draw it out himself. So she drew it out then, and that was the greatest shame that ever came upon her.
>
> They stopped then in the cave. And the next day when they went on again, Diarmuid did not leave unbroken bread like he had left every other day as a sign to Finn that he had kept his faith with him, but it was broken bread he left after him.
>
> (p. 296)

After sixteen years of wandering, Diarmuid and Grania finally make peace with Finn through the agency of Angus, and settle down to domesticity, until Diarmuid is enticed to a boar hunt through enchantments and is mortally wounded. Finn refuses to help the dying Diarmuid by bringing him healing water despite Diarmuid's reminding him of all his past services for the Fianna. After an appropriate period of mourning, Grania returns to Finn. The question of why she betrays her former love is left open; she is another Creseyde - her motives remain obscured by time and prejudice:

> But after a while Finn went secretly and unknown to the Fianna to the place where Grania was, and he got to see her in spite of her high talk, and he spoke gently to her. And she would not listen to him, but bade him get

> out of her sight, and whatever hard thing her tongue could say she said it. But all the same, he went on giving her gentle talk and loving words, till in the end he brought her to his own will. . . .
>
> And some said the change had come on her because the mind of a woman changes like the water of a running stream; but some said it was Finn that had put enchantment on her.
>
> (p. 308)

Despite its digressions and irrelevancies, this story has offered tempting material to dramatists: the motivation of each character in the love triangle remains obscure, and there are open questions about the relation between enchantment and passion, the divided loyalties of Diarmuid and the final defection of Grania. In her play, Grania, Lady Gregory sets out to answer the many questions raised by her more objective narrative account. Recognizing the impossible bulk of the material from Gods and Fighting Men, she narrows it down to three of the central events: the desertion of Finn, Diarmuid's death, and Grania's return to Finn, enough to set "as on a sod of grass, the three lovers, one of whom had to die."[96] By paring the cast down to three, she intends to go into the problem of character in depth, and her play is basically a study of motivation, each character in turn explaining his or her position in the triangle. She understands the dangers of such a reduced method, but considers the talk of lovers sufficient in itself to maintain the action of a three-act play, despite the incredulity of Yeats at her proposal.

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[96] Lady Gregory, Notes to "Grania", The Collected Plays: The Tragedies and Tragic-Comedies, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1970), p. 283.

In contrast to Deirdre, whose story is similar in many respects, Grania has come down as a maligned figure in Irish folklore. She is the whore who led an innocent man to his death, and then betrayed him:

> Grania of the yet earlier poems is not so well thought of. An old basket-maker said scornfully, "Many would tell you she slept under the cromlechs but I don't believe that, and she a king's daughter. And I don't believe she was handsome, either. If she was, why would she have run away? And another said Finn had more wisdom than all the men of the world, but he wasn't wise enough to put a bar on Grania.[97]

Lady Gregory feels more sympathy with the strong-minded Grania than with the essentially passive and suffering Deirdre, whom so many have written about already. "Grania had more power of will, and for good or evil twice took the shaping of her life into her own hands."[98] Her attitude to her characters is relatively subjective, but she still considers the subject of her play historical in the sense that it expresses the life of the country. Drama should concentrate on the complexities of human emotion and the interrelationship of individuals, and interpret historical

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[97] Lady Gregory, Introduction to The Kiltartan Poetry Book, p. vii.

[98] Notes to Grania, p. 283.

CANADIAN THESES ON MICROFICHE

21078

THÈSES CANADIENNES SUR MICROFICHE

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TITLE/TITRE

PATTERNS OF MYTHOLOGY IN MODERN IRISH DRAMA.

fact in the light of universal themes: "a question tempts one more than the beaten path of authorized history."[99]

There is a wide difference of critical opinion as to whether Lady Gregory succeeded in this play. The fact that Grania, published in 1912, has never been produced on the stage gives rise to doubts as to the dramatic potential of a three-act play which relies entirely on verbal debate for the advancement of action. The characters must constantly explain their motives and their circumstances. According to Una Ellis-Fermor[100] this verbal technique is suitable for a psychological novel, but not for the theatre, which demands action as well as words. Of course her attitude to theatre would necessarily discount the entire conception of the theatre of speech advanced by both Yeats and Lady Gregory. But in this case, Lady Gregory encounters the problem of casting heroic material in the form of folk drama; the Kiltartan idiom so integral to her comedies is put to serve an entirely different medium. As George Moore had already pointed out to Yeats, mythical characters lack heroic stature when they express themselves in the idiom of the peasant.[101] Lady Gregory seems uncertain how to use the myth; the characters are neither credibly human, nor imaginatively symbolic. The play remains too distant for personal involvement, yet too close for mythical objectivity.

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[99] Ibid.

[100] Una Ellis-Fermor. The Irish Dramatic Movement (London: Methuen, 1954), p. 158.

[101] Ave, p. 346.

Lady Gregory does exploit the currency of the myth for the purposes of irony, as did the Greek tragedians. Foreshadowings of suffering and death are apparent from the beginning of the play when Grania meets with Finn. She shows herself as a strong-minded girl in choosing her own husband, but her decision stems from her fear of the King of Foreign whose "shield [is] tusked with the tusks of a boar." (Act I, p. 14) Moreover, she prefers a quiet secure life and has "no wish to go travelling forth and hither to strange countries and by strange seas", nor any "mind for going through crosses." (Act I, p. 14) Lady Gregory anticipates the archetypal pattern of exile, wandering and suffering to which Grania and Diarmuid are fated. Moreover, Grania has already unknowingly fallen in love with Diarmuid, having seen his love spot by accident. Her avowal of devotion to Finn is ironically interrupted by a peal of laughter from the newly arrived Diarmuid. His vow to slay anyone who should impede Finn's marriage is heavily ironic, as is his assumption that Finn can easily keep a woman faithful. Lady Gregory utilizes both theatrical and literary techniques to develop the tragedy. Although the accumulation of irony is less than subtle, it does serve to heighten the suspense.

Lady Gregory mitigates the stigma of seductress which adheres to the legendary Grania through her sympathetic treatment of the lovers, but at the same time she does not discount the question of responsibility; there is no mention of a geasa or supernatural compulsion. Diarmuid's motives are entirely honourable. He pledges faith to both parties, thus initiating the central conflict of the play: love versus loyalty.

Lady Gregory's sympathies are not entirely with the lovers. She often projects Finn as the voice of maturity, the sadder but wiser man who prefers security and peace of mind to the throes of passion:

> . . . the thought of men that have passed their midday is mixed with caution and with wisdom and the work they have in hand, or weakness is gaining on their limbs. And as for youngsters, they do not know how to love, because there is always some to-morrow's love possible in the shadow of the love of to-day. It is only the old it goes through and through entirely, because they know all the last honey of the summer time has come to its ferment in their cup, and that there is no new summer coming to meet them for ever. And so they think to carry that cup through life and death and even beyond the grave.
>
> (Act I, p. 19)

The interval between the first and second acts spans seven years. The relationship between the lovers has changed since their "marriage". Diarmuid declares that he is entirely content with Grania's love, but Grania feels that he should return to the Fianna. At the height of their dispute Finn appears at the door disguised as a beggar to remind Diarmuid of his broken loyalty. Grania proudly asserts her defiance of Finn's retribution, but Diarmuid is more vulnerable to the taunts of cowardice and faithlessness, and rushes out to find Finn, despite the desperate pleading of Grania. The beggar disguise serves several functions in the act: it provides an element of the grotesque to balance and finally to undercut the idyllic world of the lovers. The beggar represents an intrusion of ugly discord and the opening up of secret doubts, the decay of trust and loyalty in love. Through the beggar's mask Finn can give vent to his least heroic emotions.

When Finn appears in his own person in Act III, his attitude is considerably softened from that presented by the beggar. He is confident of Grania's return; he understands the fickleness of human nature too well. The argument between Finn and Grania at this point becomes tedious, an attempt to account for seven years of wandering and for the resultant hardening of emotional relationships. Here Lady Gregory tries to build up the stature of Grania as a tragic heroine by reversing the conception which popular myth has of her:

> Finn. You are beautiful and I am old and scarred. But if it was different, and I to be what I was, straight as a flag-flower, and yellow-haired, and you what the common people call out that hate you, wide and lowborn, a hedgehog, an ugly thing, I would kill any man at all that would come between us, because you are my share of the world and because I love you.
>
> (Act III, p. 39)

For less obvious reasons Lady Gregory also radically alters the circumstances of Diarmuid's death. He is wounded in a fight with the King of Foreign,[102] not by the Boar of Ben Bulben. Grania's lament is sincere, but when Diarmuid ignores her love to pledge his faith to Finn, she realizes that a woman's love cannot compete with male loyalty:

> Finn. I will go, for the madness is as if gone from me; and you are my son and my darling, and it is beyond the power of any woman to put us asunder, or to turn you against me more.
>
> Diarmuid. That would be a very foolish man would give up his dear master and his friend for any woman at all. (He laughs)
>
> Grania. He is laughing - the sense is maybe coming back to him.
>
> Diarmuid. It would be very foolish thing, any woman at all to have leave to come between yourself and myself. I cannot but laugh at that.
>
> (Act III, p. 42)

Through this reconciliation of Finn and Diarmuid, Lady Gregory expresses a trait of Irish character which she detected in the love songs of West Ireland, that love of country is the real passion, and love of woman is always surpassed by male loyalties. Elizabeth Coxhead[103] maintains that because of this social environment, Lady Gregory championed Grania as a woman who could still assert her independent spirit and freedom, even when faced with the repudiation of her love. She returns to Finn, not because she is weak, but because she is strong. She suppresses her feelings and settles down determinedly to practical matters, to persuade Finn to take her back despite his promise to the dying Diarmuid. It is difficult to portray sudden change of heart credibly through dialogue, and such drastic emotional reversals provide an easy target for Maurice Meldon in Aisling. Lady Gregory is hard pressed to invest her vehement heroine with sufficient tragic stature, but she does succeed in making the crucial point that it is not the women who change, but the men. Seizing the crown, Grania confronts the mocking laughter of the world, defying the very myth of which she is a part.

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[102] Lady Gregory is not above political comment. There are several veiled political references in the play to the effect that the real enemy are the British. The young men who carry in Diarmuid are British slaves, and the King of Foreign whom Diarmuid slays represents British rule.

[103] Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait, p. 137.

Although Grania does tend to be too defensive and argumentative, it is a commendable dramatic adaptation of a diffuse legend which resists compression into rigid structure, and testifies to Lady Gregory's astute theatrical sense. But she is still best remembered for her total contribution to the Revival, for she was a shaper of myths, of plays and of men. Perhaps her varied creative talents are best summarised in Sean O'Casey's heartfelt tribute:

> Sean pictured her dissolving her own life into the life around her . . . but religiously preserving to herself a secret seed of thought that was to grow into a fine and sturdy understanding of literature; into a shrewd and germinant companionship with Yeats; into a

> wise and firm Dame Halbardier of the Irish Renaissance; into a lively prop that kept the shaky Irish Theatre standing; into the humorous dramatic writer whose plays will do their devoirs freshly on many a stage, here and elsewhere, for many a year to come.[104]

Cuchulain of Muirthemne and Gods and Fighting Men were a culmination of the efforts of many previous interpreters of Irish myth. They made accessible to the dramatists of the twentieth century the stories and heroes of the past. Because the presentation was sufficiently objective, it allowed for an unimpeded imaginative reworking by other writers. Lady Gregory's literary ambitions were nationalistic and idealistic, but they were not allowed to unduly influence the flavor of her work nor override more aesthetic and human considerations.

Although Samuel Ferguson and Standish O'Grady provided the earlier impetus which created a climate for a re-evaluation of Irish myth, they tended to be too radically patriotic, and their influence thus remains more general than specific. It must be emphasized, however, that O'Grady's works on Cuchulain provided for Ireland a mythic hero who would enter into the realms of politics and art. For W. B. Yeats and many of his contemporaries Cuchulain would become an emblem for the heroic soul of Ireland.

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[104] Sean O'Casey, "Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well", Autobiographies II (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 11.

# CHAPTER II

# INTO THE TWILIGHT

## W. B. Yeats, Alice Milligan, Edward Martyn and George Russell

Come, heart, where hill is heaped upon hill,
For there the mystical brotherhood
Of sun and moon and hollow and wood
And river and stream work out their will.

W. B. Yeats approached Irish myth with a spirit of gravity and dedication. He considered the Gaelic legends to be the most fruitful fountain of art in Europe. The Celtic movement was "the opening of this fountain" which would be "a new intoxication for the imagination of the world."[1] For Yeats these legends were not a minor mythology but the oldest and most pervasive one in Europe:

> Literature dwindles to a mere chronicle of circumstances unless it is constantly flooded with the passions and beliefs of ancient times, and that of all the fountains of the passions and beliefs of ancient times in Europe, the Slavonic, the Finnish, the Scandinavian, and the Celtic, the Celtic alone has been for centuries close to the main river of European literature.
>
> A little later the legends of Arthur and his Table and of the Hold Grail, once, it seems, the cauldron of an Irish god, changed the literature of Europe, and, it may be, changed, as it were, the very roots of man's emotions by their influence on the spirit of chivalry and on the spirit of romance; and later still Shakespeare found his Mab, and probably his Puck, and one knows not how much else of his faery kingdom, in Celtic legend.2

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[1] W. B. Yeats, "The Celtic Element in Literature" (1902), Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 187.

[2] Ibid., p. 185.

When the arts have a need for renewal, then they must go back until "they light upon a time nearer to human life and instinct, before it had gathered about it so many mechanical speculations and traditions" so that accidental things may be distinguished from vital things.[3] Moreover, the legends from the past provide an unadulterated glimpse of the early consciousness of a race:

> Alone among nations, Ireland has in her written Gaelic literature, in her old love tales and battle tales, the forms in which the imagination of Europe uttered itself before Greece shaped a tumult of legend into her music of the arts; and she can discover, from the beliefs and emotions of her common people, the habit of mind that created the religion of the muses. The legends of other European countries are less numerous, and not so full of the energies from which the arts and our understanding of their sanctity arose, and the best of them have already been shaped into plays and poems. "The Celt", as it seems, created romance, when his stories of Arthur and of the Grail became for a time almost the only inspiration of European literature, and it would not be wonderful if he should remould romance after its oldest image, now that he is recovering his possessions.[4]

By reworking Irish myth Yeats hoped to establish for Ireland an artistic tradition, to "forge . . . a new sword on [the] old traditional anvil for that great battle that must in the end re-establish the old, confident, joyous world."[5] This new Irish literature, however, would be universal in scope since, like myth, it would show "mind constantly escaped out of daily circumstance,"[6] the larger lineaments of spiritual and physical striving:

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[3] Yeats, "Literature and the Living Voice" (1906), Plays and Controversies (London: Macmillan, 1927), p. 175.

[4] Yeats, "The Literary Movement in Ireland", Ideals in Ireland, ed. Lady Gregory (London: Unicorn Press, 1901), p. 98.

[5] Yeats, "Poetry and Tradition" (1907), Essays and Introductions, p. 249.

> If we can but take that history and those legends and turn them into dramas, poems and stories full of the living soul of the present, and make them massive with conviction and profound with reverie, we may deliver the new utterance for which the world is waiting.7

Yeats did not encounter Irish myth entirely through the works of Standish O'Grady and Samuel Ferguson. He was influenced just as much by the literary movements of England as by the legendary and historical traditions of Ireland. Although he felt dissociated from the classical evolution of English literature, he did feel an imaginative sympathy with the backward looking tendencies of contemporary artists in London. Through his association with the Rhymers Club, Yeats encountered the pre-Raphaelites, who were engaged in a search for models which eschewed the vulgarity of the present: they "did not look forward or look outward, [they] left that to the prose writers; [they] looked back. [They] thought it was in the very nature of poetry to look back."[8]

In his book, The Celtic Twilight and the Nineties, Austin Clarke, who early in his literary career could be considered a "Celtic Twilight" poet, discusses this revulsion from the social and philosophical preoccupations of the Victorians, and the search for purer forms and images in the literature of the past. The pre-Raphaelites preferred a romantic melancholy world of shadowy heroes, and hazel-eyed beauties. Their vision of nature was highly subjective and emotional; their poetry is characterized by "delicate impressionism, shadowy themes, other-worldly longings and subtle wavering rhythms."[9]

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[6] Yeats, Preface to Cuchulain of Muirthemne (1902), (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1970), p. xii.

[7] Yeats, "Hopes and Fears for Irish Literature" (1892), quoted by Phillip Marcus, Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Renaissance (Ithaca, New York: Cornell U. Press, 1970), p. 258.

[8] Yeats, "Modern Poetry" (1936), Essays and Introductions, p. 495.

Tennyson anticipated the quality and mood of the Celtic Twilight in "The Voyage of the Maeldune", a Gaelic legend of a voyage to an earthly paradise, and to some extent in Idylls of the King, which evokes an enclosed world of love and honour. However, it was Matthew Arnold who defined the Celtic element in literature, basing his opinions primarily on a bogus version of Ossianic myth by James Macpherson. In an essay entitled "The Study of Celtic Literature" Arnold states that the Celtic element is characterized by a passion for Nature, imaginativeness and melancholy; there is a sense of Nature's mystery, charm and magic, and of her close affinity with men. Yeats extends Arnold's views into an even more subjective conception of Nature in his own essay, "The Celtic Element in Literature" (1902): in the world of Celtic

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[9] Austin Clarke, The Celtic Twilight and the Nineties (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1969), p. 31.

Twilight, "anything might flow and change, and become any other thing";[10] the imagination knows no limits. Celtic melancholy Yeats defines as "sorrow for things past, for unrealized hopes, for age and death."[11] The lament of Oisin to Saint Patrick over the loss of his youth and companions is probably the best known expression of this particular mood.

Yeats was particularly attracted to William Morris's treatment of the Volsung Saga. Morris created a glittering dream world which admitted only happiness and innocent desire: "He found it enough to hold up, as it were, life as it is today beside his visions, and to show how faded its colours were and sapless it was."[12] Yeats recognized the superficiality of such a vision, but welcomed the escape from reality which it offered. His high regard for Morris puzzled George Russell, who, in an essay on the two poets, underlined their obvious dissimilarities.[13] It cannot be denied, however, that one of Yeats's earliest attempts at recasting Irish myth, The Wanderings of Oisin, owes much to Morris, and Yeats valued highly Morris's praise of it. At this point, Yeats believed that the "tumultuous and heroic Pagan cycle . . . . having to do with vast and shadowy activities and with great impersonal emotions, expressed itself naturally" in epic and epic-lyric measures.[14] No dramatic method could be sufficiently expansive for such a sweep of time and space.

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[10] Essays and Introductions, p. 178.

[11] Ibid., p. 182.

[12] "The Happiest of the Poets" (1902), Essays and Introductions, p. 63.

[13] George Russell, AE: The Living Torch, ed. Monk Gibbon (New York: Macmillan, 1938), p. 251. Dorothy M. Hoare makes a more thorough comparison of Yeats and Morris in her book, The Works of Morris and of Yeats in Relation to Early Saga Literature (London: 1937). She generally denigrates Morris's translations and adaptations, and she dismisses the Irish movement as an escape into the past. Thus her comment on Yeats's The Wanderings of Oisin is that "the Irish matter only served to turn Yeats's mind more in the direction of unreality." (p. 114) She concludes that both Morris and Yeats had romantic misconceptions of the sagas.

The Wanderings of Oisin (1889) typifies the world-weariness and lassitude of the *fin de siècle*. It is coloured with the pre-Raphaelite images which Yeats later expunged from his poetic style, dissatisfied with the "yellow and its dull green, with all that overcharged colour inherited from the romantic movement."[15] However, he does recognize the symbolic potential of the myth, and treats the entire story of Oisin in the Land of Youth as an allegory of the soul. Although the narrative detail often obscures the image patterns, the poem is more than "Celtic Twilight" impressionism. Yeats's later more personal dramatic treatment of Irish mythology is an extension of the tensions between inner and outer realities he explores in this poem. The theme of the choice between mortal and immortal worlds recurs in such plays as The Land of Heart's Desire and The Only Jealousy of Emer.

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[14] Preface to "The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics" (1892), Variorum Edition of the Plays, ed. R. K. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 1288.

[15] Yeats, "Reveries Over Childhood and Youth", Autobiographies (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 74.

The basic symbolic structure is indicated in a poem Yeats wrote much later, "The Circus Animals' Desertion": the three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams, symbolize "Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose", the three incompatible things which man is always seeking. As most critics point out, however, the symbolism is more decorative than structural. It functions as a cloaking device for the personal preoccupations of the poet which have little relation to the outward narrative. Although in his later works Yeats tightens up his symbolism and integrates image with form, he continues to indulge this love of secrecy even in his plays, preferring to write for a small well-educated audience. In a letter to Katherine Tynan he indicates this discrepancy between public and private intentions:

> In the second part of 'Oisin' under disguise of symbolism I have said several things to which I only have the key. The romance is for my readers. They must not even know there is a symbol anywhere. They will not find out. If they did it would spoil the art, yet the whole poem is full of symbols - if it be full of aught but clouds.[16]

The landscape of The Wanderings of Oisin resembles that of Keats's Endymion. Extended descriptive passages of dream-like and melancholy beauty move towards a symbolic pattern, but fail to achieve it. Any suggestions of different levels of awareness are closer to the allegory of _The Faerie Queene_ than to the internalizing symbolism of _Alastor_. The poem is strengthened, however, by Yeats's intimate knowledge of the detail of Irish myth. The frequent use of names and genealogies and the interweaving of different legends, as in Book III where Oisin dreams of the Red Branch heroes, give a more concrete feel to the hazy world of the immortals. Moreover, Yeats is already aware of the dramatic potentials of his material, particularly in the conflict between Oisin and Saint Patrick. Yeats evokes the traditional image of Saint Patrick as a death-figure, a negative, repressive force antagonistic to the vital, passionate values of the ancient pagan heroes. The Christian world is characterized by poverty of spirit and of body, a world dominated by fear and suffering:

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[16] W. B. Yeats, letter to KatherineTynan (1888), The Letters, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 88.

> Making way from the kindling surges, I rode
> on a bridle-path
> Much wondering to see upon all hands, of wattles
> and woodwork made,
> Your bell-mounted churches, and guardless the sacred
> cairn and the rath,
> And a small and a feeble populace stooping with
> mattock and spade
>
> Or weeding or ploughing with faces a-shining with
> much toil wet;
> While in this place and that place, with bodies
> unglorious, their chieftains stood,
> Waiting in patience the straw-death, croziered one,
> caught in your net:
> Went the laughter of scorn from my mouth like the
> roaring of wind in a wood.[17]

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[17] Yeats, "The Wanderings of Oisin", ll. 161-168, _The Variorum Edition of the Poems_, ed. Peter Allt & Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 120. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

Saint Patrick refuses to recognize the continuing life of the old pagan order through song and story. The Fenian heroes are "long accurst and dead", their "hounds for centuries dust and air." (ll. 129ff.) It is through Oisin that Yeats affirms the vitality of Irish myth; it is recreated in the stories of the poets: "But the tale, though the words be lighter than air,/ Must live to be old like the wandering moon." (ll. 11 & 12)

Although The Wanderings of Oisin evokes the hazy twilight mood of the nineties in England, Yeats continually emphasizes that the Celtic movement involves a strong sense of particular place, that art should always be grounded in a specific country and time. The poet must summon up the images which are most entrenched in the consciousness of his race: "Back to their old legends go, year after year, the poets of the earth, seeking the truth about nature and man, that they not be lost in a world of mere shadow and dream."[18] He writes in a letter to Katherine Tynan in 1888: "We should make poems on the familiar landscapes we love, not the strange and rare and glittering scenes we wonder at."[19] In this regard he criticizes the generalized and insubstantial mythical worlds of Morris and Shelley: he believes that "if

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[18] W. B. Yeats, "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson" (1886), Davis, Mangan, Ferguson? Tradition and the Irish Writer (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1970), p. 48.

[19] Quoted by Ann Saddlemyer, "The Noble and the Beggar Man", The World of W. B. Yeats (Seattle: U. of Washington Press, 1965), p. 6.

Morris had set his stories amid the scenery of his own Wales, if Shelley had nailed his Prometheus, or some equal symbol, upon some Welsh or Scottish rock, their art would have entered more intimately . . . into our thought and given to modern poetry a breadth and stability like that of ancient poetry."[20] The summers he spent in Sligo were as important to him as the winters of intellectual stimulation in London, for here he renewed his deep love of the countryside and his contacts with Irish precursors of the Celtic movement, Ferguson, Moore, and O'Grady:

> The first thing needful if an Irish literature more elaborate and intense than our fine but primitive ballads and novels is to come into being is that readers and writers alike should really know the imaginative periods of Irish history. It is not needful that they should understand them with scholars' accuracy, but they should know them with the heart, so as not to be repelled by what is strange and outré in poems or plays taken therefrom. The most imaginative of all our periods was the heroic age and the few centuries that followed it and preceeded the Norman Invasion - a time of vast and mysterious shadows, like the clouds heaped round the sun rising from the sea. Anyone who knew Standish O'Grady's History of Ireland: The Heroic Period and Lady Ferguson's Ireland Before the Conquest . . . . would have a fair knowledge of the times.[21]

The Irish myths reflect the countryside like images in a pool:

> I am certain that the water, the water of the seas and of lakes and of mist and rain, has all but made the Irish after its image. Images form themselves in our minds perpetually as if they were reflected in some pool. We

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[20] Autobiographies, p. 150.

[21] Yeats, "Ireland's Heroic Age", (1890), Letters to the New Island, ed. Horace Reynolds (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1934), p. 107.

> gave ourselves up in old times to mythology, and saw the gods everywhere. We talked to them face to face, and the stories of that communion are so many that I think they outnumber all the like stories of all the rest of Europe.22

But an expression of "emotion for the place one grew up in" must be rooted in a specific place or it becomes just another Celtic Twilight scene. Yeats combines the passion for country which he found in the poetry of Allingham with Ferguson's pleasure in heroic legend "and while seeing all in the light of European literature, found [his] symbols of expression in Ireland."[23]

Yeats's hope was to make a national literature from the imaginative possessions of the people, from the stories and poems which had grown out of the life of Ireland, from a past of great passions. He believed that art and nationality serve each other: "there is no great literature without nationality, no great nationality without literature."[24] The dramatic formulation of Irish myth should serve to inspire the nation by appealing to a common heroic spirit through a redefinition of the old foundations of life:

> There is a dying-out of national feeling very simple in its origin. You cannot keep the idea of a nation alive where there are no national institutions to reverence, no national success to admire, without a model of it in the mind of the people . . . for the general purposes of life

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[22] Yeats, "Earth, Fire and Water", "The Celtic Twilight", Mythologies (London: Macmillan, 1959), p. 80.

[23] Lionel Johnson, quoted in "Poetry and Tradition", Essays and Introductions, p. 248.

[24] Yeats, "Browning", Letters to the New Island, p. 103.

> you must have a complex mass of images, something like an architect's model. The Young Ireland poets created a mass of obvious images that filled the minds of the young - Wolfe Tone, King Brian, Emmet. . . . Our own movement thought to do the same thing in a more profound and therefore more enduring way. When I was 25 or 26 I planned a Légende des Siècles of Ireland that was to set out with my Wanderings of Oisin, and show something to every century. . . . I did not see, until Synge began to write, that we must renounce the deliberate creation of a kind of Holy City in the imagination, and express the individual. Irish people cannot grasp more profound images than the schoolboy thoughts of Young Ireland. You can only create a model of a race to inspire the action of that race as a whole . . . when you and it share the same simple moral understanding of life. Yet in the work of Lady Gregory, of Synge, of O'Grady, of Lionel Johnson, in my own work, a school of journalists with simple moral ideas could find right building material to create a historical and literary nationalism as powerful as the old and nobler. That done, they could bid the people love and not hate.[25]

Yeats realized that the artist cannot consciously determine the purpose of his art. Artistic excellence should never be sacrificed to the narrower demands of country; its standards must remain distinctly its own. Thus in The King's Threshold the poet, Seanchan, refuses to relinquish his right to absolute artistic freedom. Nationalism is precious not because it serves Ireland, but because it serves art.

Although Yeats insisted on an Irish content for his early plays, he developed his theories on structure and style from English, French and German dramatists. The early lyrical drama shows the influence of Shelley, particularly in its emphasis on the word and the symbol. Yeats's deliberate cultivation of a symbolic drama was in part a result of his admiration for the early experimenters in the French theatre such as Maeterlink and Villiers de l'Isle Adam, and in part a conscious reaction to the stultifying influence of Shakespearean verse drama. Moreover, he was impressed by Wagner's hopes for a National Theatre which would derive its strength from the mythic and folk art of the country, and would expand the limits of the stage by a skilful use of music, scenery and symbolic verse. Although he admired Ibsen's early experiments with myth in the theatre, and his art of construction, he reacted against the pedantic use of dialogue, emphasizing the need for music and verse on the stage, to make a clear distinction between art and nature. His theatre would be one of passion and beauty, "remote, spiritual and ideal."

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[25] "Discoveries" (1906), Essays and Introductions, p. 201.

When he met Dr. John Todhunter in London in 1887, he found the opportunity to test his theories against someone who had similar aspirations in drama. Todhunter was a Dublin doctor who had retired to London to devote himself to poety and poetic drama. Like so many other Irish poets, he had been impressed by the works of O'Grady and was experimenting with Irish mythology, writing poetic versions of "The Children of Lir" and "The Sons of Tureann", and a highly romanticized dramatic version of "Deirdre" in 1898. Yeats was gratified with this choice of subject matter, and enthusiastically pointed out its potential:

> May many follow in the road Dr. Todhunter has chosen. It leads where there is no lack of subjects, for the literature of Ireland is still young, and on all sides of this road is Celtic tradition and Celtic passion crying for singers to give them voice. England is old and her poets must scrape up the crumbs of an almost finished banquet, but Ireland has still full tables.[26]

It was probably Todhunter's experiments with lyrical drama which most impressed Yeats, particularly when he witnessed a production of Todhunter's Sicilian Idyll in a little theatre in Bedford Park. One of the actresses was Florence Farr, whose performance epitomized Yeats's ideals for a theatre of speech: "her speech was music, the poetry acquired a nobility, a passionate austerity that made it akin for certain moments to the great poetry of the world." Still under the spell of Florence Farr's "tranquil beauty, sense of rhythm and beautiful voice", Yeats wrote The Land of Heart's Desire for her niece to play, and it was produced, ironically enough, with Shaw's Arms and the Man, a biting attack on idealism.

The Land of Heart's Desire is typical of Yeats's earlier twilight poetry, with its vague, mysterious atmosphere and ambivalent attitude to the faery world. After its first performance in 1894, he grew to dislike it without knowing why, and before it was acted for the first time at the Abbey Theatre in 1912, he revised it many times, leaving out the more ornamental passages and tightening up the dramatic structure. That he considered it more a poem than a play, his first experiment with blank verse, is indicated by the fact that he published it consistently with poetic works instead of with plays, and he admitted to his complete lack of practical experience with the stage when he first wrote it. Later revisions did little to dispel the shadowy atmosphere of the play, however. It was set even further back in time for its production by the Abbey because "the metrical speech would have sounded unreal if spoken in a country cottage now that [the theatre had] so many dialect comedies."[27]

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[26] Yeats, Letters to the New Island, p. 148.

The tension between mortal and immortal worlds, which is reflected in so many of Yeats's earlier poems, is evident from the beginning of the play, and is visually substantiated by the setting: a homely cottage interior with a door opening into a mysterious vague world of shadow and veiled light. The struggle between a desire for freedom and happiness, and love for an individual with all the social entanglements it involves takes place within the soul of the young bride, Mary. Once she has summoned the faeries "by soul's choice"[28] neither the powers of the Church, nor the appeals of her husband can save her. Even in this early work, Yeats is developing his theory of tragedy, passion culminating in individual choice.

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[27] Preface to "The Land of Heart's Desire" (1912), Variorum Plays, p. 1291.

[28] "The Land of Heart's Desire", Variorum Plays, p. 205.

Mary has learned of this pagan Land of Youth through the chance discovery of an old book of Irish legends, one of which tells of the love of Edain for the god Angus and her renunciation of the world's joys for the immortal pleasures of Tir na nOg:

> How a Princess Edain,
> A daughter of a King of Ireland, heard
> A voice singing on a May Eve like this,
> And followed, half awake and half asleep,
> Until she came into the Land of Faery,
> Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise,
> Where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue.
> And she is still there, busied with a dance
> Deep in the dewy shadow of a wood,
> Or where stars walk upon a mountain-top.
> (p. 184)

The function of Father Hart in the play is not simply to provide a negative buffer for this ideal world, but to indicate its ambivalence, for although he sees the pagan faeries as evil, he is capable of sympathizing with the innocent plight of the Faery Child, and it is he who takes away the crucifix and assuages Mary's fears, only to discover too late that he has strengthened the pagan powers. Mary's death on stage underlines the cold fact that complete freedom is achieved only through death. The pathos is only slightly mitigated by the concluding lyric, a melancholy portrait of the joyous world of the faeries:

> The wind blows out of the gates of the day,
> The wind blows over the lonely of heart,
> And the lonely of heart is withered away;
> While the fairies dance in a place apart,

Shaking their milk-white feet in a ring,
Tossing their milk-white arms in the air;
For they hear the wind laugh and murmur and sing
Of a land where even the old are fair,
And even the wise are merry of tongue;
But I heard a reed of Coolaney say -
'When the wind has laughed and murmured and sung,
The lonely of heart is withered away.'
(p. 210)

In The Land of Heart's Desire, Yeats uses a good deal of Irish folklore and mythology for decorative purposes, but the play is not founded upon any particular story. In later revisions he deletes much of this decorative imagery to achieve what he considers a more accessible drama, and he counsels amateur groups to leave the more literary parts alone. He realizes that myth must be a functional part of a play, not merely an expendable decoration.

Subsequent plays underwent a similar process of simplification as they evolved. The Shadowy Waters was revised many times, although even in its final form it remains more characteristic of the Celtic Twilight mood than any other of Yeats's early plays. T. S. Eliot dismissed it as a "pretty piece of pre-Raphaelitism", and Yeats himself recognized its vague artificiality. It was originally conceived as a narrative poem, first published in 1900, and then extensively revised before a subsequent publication in 1906, and it found its way onto the stage by accident; the Fay brothers had been using it as an exercise for speaking verse, and Yeats decided to strengthen its dramatic structure.

He was dissatisfied with its first performance by the Irish National Theatre Society in 1904, and again revised it for publication in 1911. But he was always aware of the difficulties it presented for the audience, and advised the uninitiated to regard it simply as a fairy tale, "and not look too anxiously for a meaning".

The play fails, however, not because of the symbolic complexity, nor the Shelleyan theme of the search for an ideal but because of the lack of substance, the vagueness of character and motive. Yeats deliberately creates a dreamlike atmosphere with all the theatrical means at his disposal: scenery and costumes combine to present a stylized image of sea, sky, and sail; the indistinct lighting blurs and blends characters and backdrop into wavering shadows. The mood is one of trance-like stillness, and all movement is kept to a minimum. The action itself is disembodied and fluid. As Yeats says in his note on "The Legendary and Mythological Foundation of the Plays", "the plot of the play has . . . no definite old story for its foundation, but was woven to a very great extent out of certain visionary experiences."[29] The Shadowy Waters lacks cohesion and strength. The generalized images of the play evoke no specific responses. Allusions to mythical heroes such as Arthur and Ollan, serve only to create false analogues instead of deepening the mythical significance of the play.

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[29] Variorum Plays, p. 1282.

The play remains an obscure expression of a personal vision experienced by Yeats while he was staying at Coole. In the dedication of the original poem to Lady Gregory, he acknowledges the elusiveness of the dream he attempts to embody, a dream which evaporates with the touch of reality:

> My dreams were cloven by voices and by fires;
> And the images I have woven in this story
> Of Forgael and Dectora and the empty waters
> Moved round me in the voices and the fires,
> And more I may not write of, for they that cleave
> The waters of sleep can make a clattering tongue
> Heavy like stone, their wisdom being half silence.
> (Dedication of The Shadowy Waters, ll. 20-26, Variorum Poems p. 218)

The harp of Angus is the most effective symbol in the play, primarily because it is fully defined by its place in Irish myth. In a poem published with the 1906 version of The Shadowy Waters, Yeats recounts why Angus fashioned this harp and how he became the Irish love god:

> When Midhir's wife changed Edain into a fly,
> He made a harp with Druid apple-wood
> That she among her winds might know he wept,
> And from that hour he has watched over none
> But faithful lovers.
> ("The Harp of Aengus", ll. 10-14, Variorum Poems, p. 220)

In the play this harp becomes a symbol of the creative imagination which can create a work of art from a world of change and death.

Even when he first conceived the poetic version of The Shadowy Waters in 1894, Yeats realized the pitfalls of the more subjective approach to such an amorphous theme as the search for immortal love and beauty, and he attempted to strengthen his personal vision with references to as many legends as possible, especially those dealing with the conflict of the Tuatha de Danaan and the Fomorians, the forces of light and darkness, good and evil in early Irish myth. He believed in the principle that "Emotions which seem vague and extravagant when expressed under the influence of modern literature, cease to be vague or extravagant when associated with ancient legend and mythology."[30] However, he also recognized that in his struggle to keep the poetry concrete by loading it with legendary material, he would make it unfit for dramatic purposes. During a visit to Coole with George Moore he tried to free The Shadowy Waters "from the occult sciences that had grown about it, Fomorians beaked and unbeaked, and magic harps and Druid spells."[31] Moore later suspected that Yeats's difficulties could be attributed to a lack of human sympathy:

> To write a play our human and artistic sympathies must be very evenly balanced, and I remembered that among my suggestions, for the reconstruction of The Shadowy Waters, the one that Yeats refused most resolutely was that the woman should refuse to accompany the metaphysical pirate to the ultimate North, but return somewhat diffidently, ashamed of herself, to the sailors who were drinking yellow ale.32

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[30] Quoted by Philip L. Marcus, Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Renaissance (Ithaca: Cornell U. Press, 1970), p. 254.

[31] George Moore, Hail and Farewell: Ave (London: William Heinemann, 1927), p. 282.

[32] Ave, p. 283.

Although Yeats rejected any compromising of the idealism of his theme, he did simplify and edit his text, and by the final acting version in 1911 he had suppressed almost all references to Irish myth, except for the harp of Angus. He had evolved from one extreme to the other, from an impossibly intricate system of images to vague, generalized allusion.

Although he experienced many difficulties in staging Irish myth,[33] Yeats remained convinced that the Celtic movement was a viable and pervasive one, not just a temporary cultural curiosity:

> Certain plays, which are an expression of the most characteristic ideals of what is sometimes called the "Celtic movement", have been acted in Dublin before audiences drawn from all classes and all political sections, and described at great length in every Nationalist newspaper. Whatever be the merit of these plays, and that must be left to the judgment of time, their success means, as I think, that the "Celtic movement", which has hitherto interested but a few cultivated people, is about to become a part of the thought of Ireland.34

The writing of The Countess Cathleen was to prove one of the biggest dramatic challenges that Yeats faced. Since its conception in 1892, he continually revised it, making major thematic and structural changes in the versions of 1895, 1901, 1912 and 1923. The final play has a radically different emphasis from the original version, and it incorporates Yeats's more mature and expansive vision of life in terms of his intricately related pattern of symbols.

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[33] In "The Fascination of What's Difficult" Yeats tries to explain his determination to succeed in the theatre.

[34] W. B. Yeats, "The Literary Movement in Ireland", Ideals in Ireland, p. 87.

Some of his initial problems with the play may have stemmed from his emotional involvement with Maud Gonne, to whom he gives credit for the inspiration. The specific relationship between the Countess Cathleen and the woman he loved was to prove an inhibiting factor, and he is indecisive in his portrayal of the central character because of his sensitivity to her public image. Moreover, the 1892 version is more closely concerned with Nationalistic issues. The Countess is another version of Cathleen ni Houlihan, and Yeats deliberately evokes pathos to stir the audience to patriotic feelings:

> Thy shadow falls
> O Weeping Willow of the World, O Eri,
> On this the loveliest daughter of thy race,
> Thy leaves blow around her.[35]

A personal intrusion, through the character of the poet, Kevin, proves to be abortive and has little to do with the tragic choice Cathleen is forced to make. Kevin functions briefly as an unrequited lover, whose mind has dwelt on the images of the past, and who has been rudely shaken into reality by his hopeless love. The demon to whom he offers his soul briefly characterizes him:

> A man of songs -
> Alone in the hushed passion of romance,

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[35] "The Countess Cathleen", Scene II, ll. 334-337 Variorum Plays, p. 74. All subsequent quotations from versions of the play are taken from this edition.

Of Finian labours and the Red-branch kings,
And he cared nothing for the life of man:
But now all changes.
(Scene IV, ll. 666-671, p. 134)

Yeats does not introduce this surrogate of himself until near the end of the play, and then even further undercuts Kevin's credibility by dismissing him as mad. The expansion of Kevin into Aleel in the later versions significantly changes the structural balance of the play, and the basic conflict of values. By 1923 Aleel has become a spokesman for the subjective life of the spirit, the world of dreams and ideals which contrasts markedly with the cruelties and injustices of reality. Yeats depicts Aleel's elusive dream-world by intermeshing Irish myth and his own personal mythology. The folk stories Aleel relates of Maeve and her women, for example, are full of subjective symbols such as the moon, stars and water. Moreover the Sidhe are depicted as subjective spirits, dancers in the condition of fire:

[Maeve] sleeps high upon wintry Knocknarea
In an old cairn of stones; while her poor women
Must lie and jog in the wave if they would sleep -
Being water-born - yet if she cry their names
They run up on the land and dance in the moon
Till they are giddy and would love as men do,
And be as patient and as pitiful.
But there is nothing that will stop in their heads
They've such poor memories, though they weep for it.
O yes, they weep; that's when the moon is full.
(Scene II, ll. 305-314, p. 55)

Aleel's dream of Angus is a direct warning to Cathleen to leave the perils of personal involvement with the world's wrongs and to live in music and light, in a twilight land where the spirit is the only reality:

> Cathleen. He bids me go
> Where none of mortal creatures but the swan
> Dabbles, and there you would pluck the harp, when the trees
> Had made a heavy shadow about our door,
> And talk among the rustling of the reeds,
> When night hunted the foolish sun away
> With stillness and pale tapers.
> (Scene III, ll. 474-480, p. 85)

Cathleen rejects this pagan world of dreams and totally commits herself to the service of others. Her choice is not between pagan and Christian values, as it is in The Wanderings of Oisin, but between a contemplative subjective life, and an active objective life. The Christian ethos of the play is not questioned; it becomes an expression of the spirit of selflessness which Cathleen finally achieves. The pagan world for her is antithetical to the spirit of Christianity since it exalts pride and passion. Angus is not an angelical god of healing but "of the old gods,/ Who wander about the world to waken the heart-/ The passionate, proud heart - that all the angels,/ Leaving nine heavens empty, would rock to sleep." (Scene III, ll. 493-496)

The 1892 version of The Countess Cathleen is more of a "twilight" play. Druidical trees and vapour provide the backdrop for Scene I, while Scene II strives for a tapestry-like effect reminiscent of Morris's works. The twilight mood of the original version is also sustained by the more lyrical nature of the verse, and by the actual incorporation of lyrics into the play, specifically "Who will Drive with Fergus". Moreover, the Countess Cathleen is associated with the romantic nostalgia of the Celtic Twilight. Unlike the later Cathleen, who repudiates Aleel's visionary world, this romantic heroine longs to escape to the land of the Sidhe:

> Would that like Adene my first forbear's daughter,
> Who followed once a twilight piercing tune,
> I could go down and dwell among the shee
> In their old ever-busy honeyed land.
> (Scene II, ll. 267-270 , pp. 60 & 62)

This immortal longing is expressed by several characters, and there is no clear differentiation of values. Oona, for example, a type of garrulous old peasant woman which Yeats knew well from his youth in Sligo, is completely inconsistent in her relationship to Cathleen, at one time singing her songs of "old things", and at another, warning her against pagan superstition. In later versions, Oona is more consistently the voice of Christian values, vying with Aleel for Cathleen's commitment.

The 1892 version of the play is so replete with pagan spirits, Sheogues, thevishies and sowlths, that Yeats felt obliged to give a detailed glossary in the 1899 issue of Beltaine when The Countess Cathleen was first performed in the Literary Theatre. In the 1912 version he deletes most of these and changes all of the Irish gods of darkness which appear at the end to Miltonic demons like Asmodel and Bebel, believing that these were more widely known. He utilizes Irish myth more effectively in the climax of the 1923 play when he successfully mingles gods and heroes with saints and angels. The struggle between the forces of good and evil for Cathleen's soul is presented through Aleel's vision of the warring gods of light and darkness in the Battle of Moytura:

> Angels and devils clash in the middle air,
> And brazen swords clang upon brazen helms.
> Yonder a bright spear, cast out of a sling,
> Has torn through Balor's eye, and the dark clans
> Fly screaming as they fled Moytura of old.
> (Scene V, ll. 925-29, p. 165)

Christian and pagan mythologies are all extended images of the Unity of Being. In 1901 Yeats indicates in a Preface to his poems that he sees Christian and pagan myth in Ireland as integrally related:

> Christianity and the old nature faith have lain down side by side in the cottages, and I would proclaim that peace as loudly as I can among the kingdoms of poetry. . . . I may even try to persuade other, in more sober prose, that there can be no language worthy of poetry of the meditation of the soul than that which has been made, or can be made, out of a subtlety of desire, an emotion of sacrifice, a delight in order, that are perhaps Christian, and myths and images that mirror the energies of the woods and streams, and of their wild creatures. Has any part of that majestic heraldry of the poets had a very different fountain? Is it not the ritual of the marriage of heaven and earth?[36]

Yeats's first attempt to dramatize a complete Irish myth was in 1900, when he collaborated with George Moore to write Diarmuid and Grania for the Irish Literary Theatre.

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[36] Quoted by David R. Clark, "Vision and Revision: Yeats's The Countess Cathleen", The World of W. B. Yeats, p. 142.

Both men were initially enthusiastic about the project; in a speech at a meeting of supporters for the Literary Theatre in 1900, Moore overflowed with confidence in the genius of Yeats and in the eminent worthiness of their theme:

> A more suitable subject than the most popular of our epic stories could hardly be found for a play for the Irish Literary Theatre, and I may say that it would be difficult to name any poet that Ireland has yet produced more truly elected by his individual and racial genius to interpret the old legend than the distinguished poet whose contemporary and collaborateur I have the honour to be.[37]

Their play might "prove to be that dramatic telling of the great story which Ireland has been waiting for for these many years."[38]

Moore was particularly impressed with Yeats's extensive knowledge of the variations of the legend, and his personal conception of it, which was for Moore, surprisingly dramatic in emphasis. For his part, Yeats recognized his own weaknesses as a fledgling dramatist and acknowledged Moore's superiority in matters of construction and dramatic climax. They decided on a system of writing which would allow Moore precedence in construction, and Yeats in style. The final words would be those of Yeats. Of course this arrangement did not prevent disagreements: the personalities and talents of the authors were too dissimilar for any successful interaction of minds. Lady Gregory was dubious about the project from its first inception at Coole, because she thought that it would distract Yeats from his poetry, and because she privately considered Moore's talent far inferior to that of her protégé. She reminded Moore that they "were of different temperaments and had arisen out of different literary traditions."[39] Her advice to Yeats was that such a collaboration would injure his own art, and Yeats later concurred with this view:

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[37] George Moore, "Literature and the Irish Language", Ideals in Ireland, p. 45.

[38] *Ibid.*

> Because [Moore's] mind was argumentative, abstract, diagrammatic, mine sensuous, concrete, rhythmical, we argued about words. In later years, through much knowledge of the stage, through the exfoliation of my own style, I learnt that occasional prosaic words gave the impression of an active man speaking. . . . Our worst quarrels, however, were when he tried to be poetical, to write in what he considered to be my style.[40]

Lady Gregory not only gave judicious warnings and refereed quarrels, but prepared a synopsis of the Diarmuid and Grania legend from which Yeats and Moore worked. Her proximity to this dramatic experiment probably led to her own attempt at the story in 1907, and there are distinct similarities of interpretation between her Grania and the earlier play. Under the influence of Lady Gregory's folk interests at this time Yeats was anxious to try a peasant play, while Moore insisted on a heroic play. There was much debate over whether a Galway dialect was possible in the mouths of heroes, Moore contending that it would render the characters farcical. Yeats contended that "Through dialect . . . one escapes from abstract words, back to the sensation inspired directly by the thing itself", while Moore insisted on the artificiality of dialect: a play cannot be written "by turning common phrases which rise up in the mind into uncommon phrases."[41] Yeats proposed that Moore, who had trouble writing in Anglo-Irish dialect, should write in French; Lady Gregory would translate his text into English, Taidgh O'Donaghue would translate the English into Irish, and Lady Gregory would translate the Irish text back into English.[42]

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[39] Ave, p. 272.

[40] Autobiographies, pp. 434-36.

In an understandable pique, Moore went to France to attempt a French version; later he published part of this version in Ave to "convince the reader that two such literary lunatics as Yeats and [himself], existed, contemporaneously, and in Ireland, too, a country not distinguished for its love of letters."[43] Moore did finally revert to writing Diarmuid and Grania in English, and it was subsequently edited by Yeats, so that it is virtually impossible to tell how much of the play can be attributed to each man, except for the more obvious lyrical or melodramatic passages. At the request of Moore, Edward Elgar provided a musical scenario for the first production by

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[41] Ave, p. 348.

[42] Ave, p. 351.

[43] Ave, p. 361.

Benson's company in 1901, which, naturally enough, aroused the ire of radical nationalists who considered English music unworthy of an Irish subject. By this time Yeats had divorced himself from the play, and left the entire production to Moore, who had several novel ideas on theatrical effect. Despite his initial insistence on a heroic play, he made no effort to maintain a heroic tone, and he even suggested that a sheep be carried on stage in the second act, thinking the inevitable mirthful response would be a suitable interlude before the final tragedy. Moreover, he considered sheep to be integral to the Arcadian scene of innocence presented by the second act: "The shearing will take the audience back to the beginning of things. Man has shorn sheep since the beginning and the wars and the strive [sic] will break in upon Arcady as they always have done."[44]

Neither Yeats nor Moore considered the play worthy of publication, and it was thought to be lost until a typescript was discovered in 1951, and it consequently appeared in the Dublin Magazine. Yeats realized that because he had to give up personal standards, his capacity for judgment was mitigated, and the uncertainty of his approach to Irish myth results in a play which lacks a clear conception of either theme or character.

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[44] Letter to Yeats, 1901, Variorum Plays, p. 1171.

Although the protagonists of Diarmuid and Grania are mundane, they are surrounded with considerable heroic spectacle. The first act is set at the banqueting hall of Tara, the throne-room of the High King around which are hung the shields of the Fianna. As he hangs the shields, the servant, Niall, explains to a boy the ancestral background of King Cormac, underlining the great heroic tradition of the Gaels. Similarly he defines the lineage and importance of the Fianna, emphasizing their great pride:

> I was going to tell you who made the Fianna, Boy; it was Cool. He took a thousand men out of every kingdom, and made them into an army, and set them to watch the shores. . . . They fight well, but they are proud.[45]

This insistence on the pride of the Fianna recurs in the play, but its thematic function remains undefined. It is not developed as a tragic flaw which results in catastrophe, but neither is it the fully blown heroic virtue which Yeats projects in his later plays.

Both Yeats and Moore feel a definite need to educate their audience, and intersperse blocks of historical explanation with the action. Like Samuel Ferguson and Standish O'Grady they portray Finn and his men as national heroes. Cormac, for example, sees the Fianna as champions of Irish freedom:

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[45] Yeats and Moore, "Diarmuid and Grania", Act I, Variorum Plays, pp. 1174-75. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

> Finn and his Fianna have made Eri
> great, as when the Red Branch was at Emain Macha.
> (Act I, ll. 267-68, p. 1180)

And for the bride price, Finn promises to guard the kingdom. As a result, Diarmuid's betrayal of Finn has both personal and political overtones, since his actions will inevitably split the kingdom. It is only after his death that the land is reunited against a common enemy.

Interspersed with this heroic-nationalistic material are the rustic scenes of peasant life. Act II is set entirely in an idyllic valley where the major preoccupations are sheep-shearing and cattle-raising. The High King Cormac is reduced to a solicitous old father who tries to protect Diarmuid and Grania from the wrath of Finn.

Against this pastoral background Yeats and Moore set the tragic death of Diarmuid. However, they fail to achieve any kind of heroic perspective in the final act because they settle for melodrama. In attempting to humanize their protagonists at the end they render them bathetic, and their suffering has no significance beyond a limited emotional appeal. The cynical voice of Conan brings this overwrought world back to reality at the end, but the irony of his judgment of Grania is lost because the relationship between Grania and Diarmuid or between Grania and Finn has not been made clear.

Grania is the least consistent of the characters, perhaps because Yeats and Moore wish to underline her essential fickleness. But certainly it is never clear whether she is a strong and determined heroic character forging her destiny, as Lady Gregory later portrays her, or a weak, vacillating woman in the hands of fate. When she first appears in Act I, she has already decided not to marry Finn for no more specific reason than that he is old, and she deliberately chooses a potential champion and lover from amongst the shields hung on the walls based on Laban's definition of the heroes: Diarmuid "will not be remembered for deeds of arms but as a true lover, and . . . he will die young." However, Yeats and Moore try to create a more substantial bond between Grania and Diarmuid. There is a vague allusion to a previous encounter when Grania saw Diarmuid's love spot, but any supernatural element remains undeveloped. Yeats and Moore prefer a more idealistic, romantic conception of love:

> Grania. I desired you and you were in my thoughts before I saw you, Diarmuid. You were in my thoughts, Diarmuid. (She takes him in her arms)
>
> Diarmuid. I too desired you and you were in my thoughts - Oh beautiful woman! You were in my thoughts, Grania. Let me look at you. Let me put back your hair . . .
>
> (Act I, p. 1185)

At this point Grania's love appears to be a convenient and fortunate occurrence rather than a deeply emotional compulsion.

Whether or not she is to be regarded sympathetically in Act I, however, by Act II she has obviously been transformed into the fickle female. She wears jewels to impress Finn and berates Diarmuid for the monotony of her life. Initially, she is projected as a child of nature who, like Deirdre, knows and loves the ways of the woods, but she soon grows restless in the pastoral valley, and feels that their love is festering because of its isolation from the more heroic world of action. When Diarmuid and Finn do achieve the reconciliation she desires, however, then Grania like Lady Gregory's heroine, is resentful of being excluded from this world of male loyalties and jealous that Finn has pursued Diarmuid rather than her:

> I was proud to think you followed Diarmuid for me, but you have said it was to avenge the breaking of an oath. This is a man's broil. No woman has part in it.
> (Act II, p. 1203)

After goading Diarmuid into hunting the boar with accusations of cowardice, Grania again changes her mind and attempts to dissuade him by recounting her dreams of his death, but the fact that Yeats and Moore emphasize her barrenness perhaps indicates that she is essentially hollow and false: she "was not meant to sit by the fireside with children on her knees." (Act III, p. 1212)

Diarmuid is portrayed as the tragic hero who is driven first to disloyalty, then to madness and death by his love for a woman. The initial conflict between love and honour is common to most versions of the legend, and Yeats and Moore strengthen its significance with allusions to Tristan and Isolde: Diarmuid will keep a sword between Grania and himself to show that his oath to Finn has not been broken. But by Act II his feelings of loyalty have completely evaporated; he wants only the seclusion and peace of a pastoral life with Grania, certain in his feeling that they will never be forgiven by Finn:

> Come, look at the sleepy evening. These evenings are better than the evenings of battle long ago, and were I among my old companions again, Usheen, Goll, Caoelte, I should look back upon these quiet evenings when the flock came home and you gave me supper in the dusk.
>
> (Act II, p. 1195)

However, Diarmuid is finally persuaded by an old shepherd to take a new oath with his former leader to ensure the unity of Ireland. He consistently acts more from external compulsion than from inner motivation; he goes to his death feeling that it is inevitable and thus cannot be avoided even if he refuse the boar hunt. His heroic attitude resembles that of Cuchulain in Yeats's later plays when he goes to battle sure in the knowledge of his death:

> Diarmuid. The things to come are like the wind; they could sweep this house away. This image of death is coming like the wind - who knows what enchantment has called it out of the earth. It was not here yesterday; it was not here at noon. I have hunted deer in these woods and have not seen the slot of natural or unnatural swine. No, it will not bear thinking of. I am caught in this valley like a wolf in a pit . . .
>
> (Act II, p. 1206)

In effect he wills his death at the end, refusing the water three times that Finn brings. Yeats and Moore here take the onus from Finn, whom they wish to preserve as a cultural hero. In his last confusion, Diarmuid thinks he hears the voice of Finn, when in fact Grania has called to him to bring him out of the regions of death. This episode provides another thematic detail for Lady Gregory's play. For Yeats, Diarmuid's death is another variation of the conflict between the mortal and immortal worlds: Diarmuid hears the harp of Angus, which lures him to Tir na nOg, but its music is rendered indistinct by the noise of the common world. His status as a tragic hero is confirmed by the closing funeral orations and processions, again rendered in a Shakespearean style, with Finn suitably having the final word of commendation.

Yeats and Moore attempt to bolster the tragic direction of the play through repeated references to the machinations of fate, the most obvious symbol of which is the Druidess, Laban, and her spinning wheel, which functions as an image in two of the three acts. Her presence has no precedent in the original legends, and it is likely that Yeats borrowed her from Lavarcham in the Deirdre stories since the play as a whole recalls many aspects of that myth. The prophetic voice is sounded by others in the play; even Conan, the cynical realist repeats the story of Diarmuid's early death. Finn's final prophecy of the inevitable destruction of the Fianna reinforces the fatalistic mood of the play:

> Finn. I cannot save Diarmuid, his end has been foretold. I cannot change it. The deaths of everyone of us and the end of the Fianna have been foretold. Many will die in a great battle, Oscar who is but a child will die in it, but I shall die long after by a spear thrust, and Diarmuid by the tusk of a boar, and Usheen will go far away, and Caoilte storm the house of the gods at Assaroe.
>
> (Act III, p. 1219)

Diarmuid and Grania could be considered one of Yeats's earliest dramatic statements on the decline of the heroic in modern society.

In 1900 while Yeats and Moore were struggling with the complexities of the Grania myth, Alice Milligan's play on the same story was successfully produced by a company of British actors in the Gaiety Theatre. The Last Feast of the Fianna was enthusiastically received by Yeats and heralded by contemporary critics as a fitting poetic embodiment of Irish nationalism. According to the Daily Express, "if the aim of the Irish Literary Theatre is to create a national drama it is obvious that the development of Miss Milligan's method is the proper road to reach ultimate success."[46] Enthusiasm for the play was short-lived, however, and the two complementary pieces which were to make up an Oisin trilogy were never produced. Oisin in Tir na nOg and Oisin and Padraig were published in the Sinn Fein in 1909 in both Irish and English, but they were largely ignored.[47]

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[46] Lennox Robinson, Ireland's Abbey Theatre: A History, 1899 - 1951 (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1951), p. 15.

Alice Milligan's approach to Irish myth was more in the spirit of Standish O'Grady than of W. B. Yeats. She fully intended that her plays foster Irish nationalism by reawakening an interest in the glorious achievements of the past. Her whole life was dedicated to this end. After studying Irish history and archeology, she achieved a fluency in Irish and showed a dedication to the Gaelic League which particularly impressed Sean O'Casey. Her first book of poetry, Hero Lays, was published in 1908, inspired by the Histories of Standish O'Grady, who remained a much admired guide to Irish myth. Like Thomas Davis, she had an overt political or propagandist bias in much of her poetry, which proved an impediment to a wider fame, although in 1914 she impressed Thomas McDonagh as being "the most Irish of living Irish poets and therefore the best."[48] A typical example of her application of Irish myth to contemporary political circumstances is the poem, "Till Ferdia Came", written during the 1922-23 Civil War. The famous battle at the ford is transposed into political allegory:

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[47] Oisin in Tir na nOg and Oisin and Padraic are short verse plays of about four hundred lines each, relatively static portrayals of significant moments in the Oisin story. In Oisin in Tir na nOg Milligan depicts the reason for Oisin's return to his homeland after staying three hundred years with the Sidhe: he wants to sing the triumphs and glories of the Fianna to a people who have forgotten Ireland's heroic past. In Oisin and Padraic Milligan briefly touches on the circumstances of Oisin's journey to Tir na nOg and his return to Erin. The conflict between Oisin and Padraic is not clearly defined in the play, and Oisin's final lament for Ireland's past glories is mitigated by the comforts offered by "the hospitable house of the clerics". It is apparent from the detailed background material provided for the plays that Milligan hopes to educate the Irish, to tell them the stories of their nation like a modern filid or bard.

> We read it in the ancient tale,
> The glory of the Northern Gael;
> How young Cuchulainn's single sword
> Stemmed the advance of Connacht's horde,
> And one by one the champions fell
> On Ulla's border guarded well;
> Battle he deemed a joyous game
> Till to the ford Ferdia came.
>
> . . . . . . .
>
> Oh brothers! Sons of one loved land,
> Who to such combat armed each hand,
> What cause of fury and of hate
> Had either? By what mocking fate
> Are ye, begirt with scornful foes,
> Now locked in self-destructive throes,
> Whilst they, in calm complacence jeering,
> Wait our annihilation nearing,
> Wishful that after all your toils,
> Of Victory they shall reap the spoils.[49]

The Last Feast of the Fianna is less obviously political, but like Yeats's version of the Grania legend, it promotes the ideals of Irish nationalism. As does Yeats, she assumes that the story is not widely known, particularly among the more "educated", the Trinity professors:

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[48] Alice Milligan, Poems, ed. Henry Mangan (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1954), p. ix.

[49] Poems, pp. 189-192.

> If it was to be produced before a company of Kerry peasants, a single note would not be needed; they would appreciate fully the masterful attitude of Fionn towards Grania, her unconcealed ill-will to Oisin, her suavity to gentle Caoilte MacRonan. But an "educated" Dublin audience will need to be told who these people were; for have not the most cultivated and learned men of Trinity College declared that a finished piece of Irish literature does not exist? We must therefore assume that they have never opened the Ossianic dialogues, which, even in a crude translation, afford a perpetual fund of humour and philosophy.[50]

Unlike Lady Gregory, Alice Milligan chooses to cast Grania as the villain; she is a scheming, selfish beauty who without scruple tampers with the lives of the best of the Fianna. This interpretation remains faithful to the folk versions of the legend, which tend to distrust Grania's motives. Finn and Oisin are the strong heroic characters: Finn is the traditional wise king and Oisin the valiant warrior-poet. Although she does retain such stereotypes, Alice Milligan, like Lady Gregory, is primarily concerned with exploring human questions. Her play deals with the reactions of Finn and Oisin to Grania's return after Diarmuid's death, and with the influence her return has on Oisin's decision to follow Niamh and desert his comrades. Such questions are not raised by the myths themselves, which generally are unpreoccupied with human motives, and rarely relate one story to another. From the diversity and complexity of two different legends, Milligan weaves a valid study of human motivation. She denies any higher purpose, including the spiritual or mystical meaning attributed to the play by Yeats, who sees in it another working out of the conflict between mortal and immortal worlds. His interpretation is more a reflection of his own preoccupations than it is an accurate analysis of the play:

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[50] _Beltaine_, No. 2, ed. W. B. Yeats (London: At the Sign of the Unicorn, 1900), p. 18.

> The emotion which a work of art awakens in an onlooker has commonly little to do with the deliberate purpose of its maker, and must vary with every onlooker. Every artist who has any imagination builds better than he knows. Miss Milligan's little play delighted me because it has made in a very simple way and through the vehicle of Gaelic persons, that contrast between immortal beauty and the ignominy and mortality of life, which is the central theme of ancient art.[51]

Although the play, as Lennox Robinson observes, is characterized by a mood of melancholy, a constant awareness of decline, age and death, it is not a rejection of life, but rather a heroic affirmation of life in the face of death. It is in Finn's defiant confrontation of all that life can bring, including death, that the heroic note is sounded:

> In my life of ages since boyhood, Death and I have always been comrades. I have sent hosts of hostages to his dark Dun to the grave. The men I have slain entered that portal some unwillingly, some very bravely, and shall I now turn away and fear to follow those I have subdued? O fairy woman of the music, tell this to the lords of life, that Fionn MacCumhal follows Death, whom even the De Daanans fear. I will face the terror that men dread. I will unveil the secret mystery, and if Death is more

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[51] *Beltaine*, No. 2, p. 21.

> more terrible than life, at least I will not cry out in fear.52

And although Oisin does follow Niamh into the beautiful immortal world of the Sidhe, Milligan clearly indicates that this world is an ambivalent life-in-death existence, for it necessitates a death to the former self and to all the joys of the mortal world, which are the more keen because they are transitory. The climactic conclusion of the play which juxtaposes joyous fairy music and the agonized cry of the warriors after Oisin, points out this paradox, which Yeats, on many occasions in poetry and drama, has expressed. His summary of the theme of The Last Feast of the Fianna in Beltaine is clearly a mistaken one, for despite Finn's grief at the end, and the general twilight mood, the predominating theme is one of heroic assertion, not "the mortality and indignity of all that lives."[53]

Yeats liked the lyrical movement and atmospheric beauty of the play. The elevated poetic prose, musical interludes, and distant chanting blend into a harmony of sound which he so prized in his theatre of speech. The stylized setting with the sea as backdrop, the ritualized actions and the telescoping of events and time, all approach the ideals of the theatre subsequently advanced by Yeats in Plays and Controversies. Alice Milligan also shows an acute sense of

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[52] Alice Milligan, The Last Feast of the Fianna (Chicago: De Paul Univeristy, 1967), p. 53.

[53] Beltaine, No. 2, p. 24.

dramaturgy: the discordant Grania, an aging dissatisfied woman, is contrasted effectively with the harmony and beauty of the selfless Niamh, for example. Her strident tones almost drown out the music of the Sidhe when Niamh appears:

> Oisin. Truly the music is sweet, if only we could hear it, but the women in the hall are making a harsh and horrible clamour.
>
> (p. 50)

Oisin's moment of choice is heightened by Niamh's initial attempts to persuade Finn and then Caoilte to join her. His final decision is rendered rather weakly, however, with the result that he deteriorates into a pathetic remnant of his former heroic stature:

> Oisin. (pauses, half relents, but looks at Grania and says plaintively) Since Grania came to bide here with her angry looks and bitter words, with her stories to you of how I befriended Diarmuid, my life has known no peace. And since Oscar was laid to rest, with the heavy stones over his heart, with the black sod under his head, my life has known no joy. Without peace, without joy, without friendship, without music, I am weary of the place and willing to depart.
>
> (p. 54)

According to the review in The United Irishman, Alice Milligan had admirably succeeded in at least the nationalistic intentions of her play, the audience finding this pageant of heroes and gods an exhilarating experience:

> The scene, words and figures were a revelation. It gave us the only glimpse we have seen of what the Ireland of pre-Christian days must have been. There was a richness about the dresses of the women which recollects the old books; a manliness about the men that offered a little idea of the great host whose swords were the sure protection of Eireann. There was a simplicity over all

> that made the contrast between this theatre and all others at once evident. . . . The staging was excellent, and the background exceptionally fine.[54]

Yeats similarly saw the play in terms of Irish theatre, and on those terms concluded that it was successful, forbearing to make any more sweeping assessment.

Edward Martyn's Maeve was produced with The Last Feast of the Fianna in 1900, and like Milligan's play, was enjoyed primarily because of its political and national allusions. Yeats was impressed with the "wonderful literary invention" of Peg Inerny, another version of the hag - queen motif in Irish myth. Martyn links the old hag with the image of the beautiful Maeve to portray the double face of Cathleen ni Houlihan. Peg Inerny is the earthly embodiment of the ideal spirit of Ireland, and she persuades the young Maeve, whom she considers to be the last remnant of spiritual beauty in Ireland, to die to the common materialistic world so that she may join her namesake in Tir na nOg. Peg Inerny's ambivalent nature is underlined by the different reactions of Maeve and Finola to her. Maeve welcomes her as a companion spirit, but Finola fears her as a sinister omen of sorrow and death. In a painfully obvious way, Peg is also a political symbol: she is the spirit of Ireland which resists the encroachment of English materialism.

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[54] Lennox Robinson, Ireland's Abbey Theatre, p. 15.

Martyn calls his play a "psychological drama", perhaps to indicate that the major conflict takes place within the mind of his heroine, Maeve O'Heynes. She is torn between a materialistically advantageous marriage to an Englishman which will save her family heritage, and an ardent love for the spirit of Ireland found in old songs and in secluded ruins. When brought to the final choice, like Oisin in The Last Feast of the Fianna, she leaves the world of compromising reality to join with the world of ideal love and beauty. Maeve fails as a credible character, remaining inaccessible and unsympathetic, despite her frequent displays of emotion, and Joseph Holloway observed in a review of the play in his Journals that "Maeve's cold inanimate manner and wistful, far-away look and visionary talk only created laughter among a most kindly disposed audience. On occasion they could not refrain from irreverent mirth at the daft behaviour of this eminently unlovable woman."[55] That she is intended as a symbol, an ideal of spiritual beauty, a cold embodiment of imaginative truth is obvious throughout the play. She is inextricably linked with the Irish immortals: her beauty is that of the Tuatha de Danaan, "those tall beautiful children of the Dagda Mor". And her namesake is the tall warrior queen of Irish myth, whose spirit, according to folk belief, still walks the mountains of Connacht. Martyn chooses to ignore the more literary interpretations of Queen Maeve as the promiscuous and cunning antagonist of the Red Branch. Like Yeats he prefers to follow the more popular folk tradition which sees Maeve as the tall, fierce queen of the fairies, a symbol of heroic beauty. It is probable that Yeats's imaginative interpretation of Maeve influenced Martyn's, as they are remarkably similar. In The Celtic Twilight under the title "And Fair Fierce Women", and again in Beltaine, Yeats describes the apparition of Maeve as she showed herself to a peasant woman:

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[55] Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre: A Selection from his Unpublished Journal, ed. Robert Hogan & Michael J. O'Neill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), p. 10.

> One day a woman that I know came face to face with heroic beauty, that highest beauty which Blake says changes least from youth to age, a beauty which has been fading out of the arts, since that decadence we call progress set voluptuous beauty in its place. She was standing at the window, looking over to Knocknarea where Queen Maeve is thought to be buried when she saw, as she told me, 'the finest woman you ever saw, travelling right across from the mountains and straight to her.' The woman had a sword by her side and a dagger lifted up in her hand, and was dressed in white, with bare arms and feet. She looked very strong, but not wicked, that is, not cruel.[56]

Yeats uses Maeve as a symbol of heroic beauty which has died out of Irish life in his poem "The Old Age of Queen Maeve":

> Though now in her old age, in her young age
> She had been beautiful in that old way
> That's all but gone; for the proud heart is gone
> And the fool heart of the counting-house fears all
> But soft beauty and indolent desire.

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[56] Yeats, "The Celtic Twilight", Mythologies (London: Macmillan, 1959), p. 57.

She could have called over the rim of the world
Whatever woman's lover had hit her fancy,
And yet had been great-bodied and great-limbed,
Fashioned to be the mother of strong children;
And she's had lucky eyes and a high heart,
And wisdom that caught fire like the dried flax,
At need, and made her beautiful and fierce,
Sudden and laughing.[57]

For Martyn, the supreme symbol of all the positive values in the play is Tir na nOg, the land of immortal beauty, an intellectual paradise where each man comes to his ideal. Here resides the essential spirit of Ireland, which Martyn also finds epitomized in Ireland's heroic past and in the country's untouched natural beauty. To confuse the idealistic issues even more, he implants in the play his own romantic notions of ideal Greek beauty, that cold formalism which Keats evokes in "Ode on a Grecian Urn", and which Martyn fancies he sees in Irish architecture. He does not seem to be aware that this static formalism has little relation to the vibrant colour of Irish myth.

Martyn is most successful in his creation of atmosphere in Maeve, as George Moore observes in his preface to a printed version of the play: "Therefore, Maeve is made of moonlight and hoar frost and light of morning." Moore considers the play a delight in the theatre; it portrays the spirit and sense of an ill-fated race "in an atmosphere that is magnificently conceived and splendidly sustained."[58] Certainly Moore's enthusiasm must be taken with a grain of salt, since he is notoriously bombastic when praising friends or damning enemies. The scene to which he refers, however, is one of the highlights of the play, a glorious pageant of light and music which fades away into the cold frost of the new dawn. The stage directions imply the possibilities of such a visual effect:

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[57] Yeats, "The Old Age of Queen Maeve", Variorum Poems, pp. 180-181. In this poem, Yeats sees Maude Gonne in terms of Maeve. She has the same heroic beauty, and "looked as though she lived in an ancient civilization where all superiorities whether of mind or body were part of public ceremonial." (Autobiographies, p. 364).

> During this song all, including Maeve O'Heynes, have gradually moved off towards the cairn and faded away with the aurora borealis, so that, when the music ceases, no trace of them remains. A faint grey light of dawn now prevails and then the whole scene, at the approach of sunrise, is discovered to be completely white with a thick coating of hoar frost. After a while Hugh FitzWalten, muffled and carrying a large bunch of flowers, enters from the left.59

The frost visually underlines the ambivalence of Maeve's death, which is at the same time an achievement of her ideal cold beauty, and the cold finality of the grave.

The initial appeal of Maeve was short-lived,and it has not been revived in Ireland, or elsewhere. Yeats foresaw that its idealism would be its limitation, considering it too remote from normal life to draw the crowd, a peculiarly accurate criticism, coming from an artist so attracted to the supernatural.

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[58] Andrew E. Malone, The Irish Drama (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1965), pp. 259-60.

[59] Edward Martyn, Maeve (Chicago: De Paul University Press, 1967), p. 36.

The early dramatists of the Irish Renaissance saw in the legends expressions of mystical or spiritual truisms. Ancient Ireland was a fluid, ephemeral region, a dream world where gods and heroes intermingled. Both W. B. Yeats and George Russell were attracted to this more esoteric side of myth, and interpreted Irish legends as another manifestation of spiritual reality through vision. Russell considered Irish gods and goddesses analogous to the divine hierarchies of Eastern mythologies, and he respectfully treated them in his poetry and paintings as Blakean visions of psychic phenomena. Similarly Yeats sought to bring to Irish legends the richness of Eastern mysticism, hoping that the invisible gates would open and that this "philosophy would find its manuals of devotion in all imaginative literature."[60] In the Rose poems, in particular, Yeats combines his penchant for theosophy with the more specific images and names of Irish myth. "The Secret Rose" from The Wind Among the Reeds moves in rapid progression through Christian and Rosicrucean images, oblique references to Conchubar's vision of the cross before his death, Cuchulain's amorous submission to the goddess Fand, Caoilte's battle with the gods, and Fergus's renunciation of the kingship.

However, Yeats always considered myth as raw material for his art, whereas Russell established a theosophical cult for the purpose of venerating the wisdom of the past. His stance of inspired prophet impressed some and annoyed others. Sean O'Casey's portrait of AE in Drums Under the Windows and Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well reflects his contempt for a man who refused to deal in realities, whose world was an artificial creation of spirits and demi-gods:

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[60] Yeats, "The Trembling of the Veil", Autobiographies, p. 254.

> Hard at Yeats's heels followed the stout, lumbering George Russell, watching figures, featured with fire issuing out of their petuitary glands, streaming from every chimney-top and every smoker's pipe; jumping hilariously, when on a holiday, from peak to peak of the Wicklow Mountains, the planets for ever chiming the advent of an avator who would lead Eire back to her old gods.[61]

For O'Casey, AE's palette was capable of only the indistinct twilight visions of "thinly-tinted dreams", and his theosophical blather had "dulled the ears, damned the eyes, and twisted the tongues of the younger thinkers and artists of Ireland. AE has scattered his divine processions, his ancestral selfs, his exalted immortalities, and his cosmic purposes as no sower would dare scatter his seed."[62] Moreover, his primitivist philosophy which extolled Nature as the origin of all beauty and goodness was unrealistic and ridiculous, and the legacy of this Twilight Poet to the culture of Ireland was a "handful of pebbles, sanctified with a little gilt, that he took to be jewels."[63]

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[61] Sean O'Casey, "Hora Novissima", "Drums Under the Windows", Autobiographies I (London: Macmillan, 1963).

[62] Sean O'Casey, "Dublin's Glittering Guy", "Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well," Autobiographies II (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 178.

[63] Ibid., p. 185.

However, AE's approach to Irish mythology was not as superficial as O'Casey chose to believe, and not surprisingly he resembled Yeats in his emphasis on the nationalistic potential of the old legends. He was well aware of the dangers of vague spiritualism, which led away from the firmer realities of race and country, and saw in Irish myth a means for young writers to anchor themselves in the familiar soil of their nation. Like Yeats, he saw an inexhaustible supply of material which could be tapped for distinctly Irish art forms:

> More important, however, for the literature we are imagining as an offset to the cosmopolitan ideal would be the creation of heroic figures, types, whether legendary or taken from history, and enlarged to epic proportions by our writers, who would use them in common, as Cu, Fionn, Ossian and Oscar were used by the generations of poets who have left us the bardic history of Ireland . . . and so from iteration and persistent dwelling on a few heroes, their imaginative images found echoes in life, and other heroes arose, continuing their tradition of chivalry.
>
> That such types are of the highest importance, and have the most ennobling influence on a country, cannot be denied.[64]

Russell's emphasis echoes that of O'Grady who also saw mythical heroes as moral exempla, and in this regard both were equally naive in their nationalistic preoccupations. It is ironic, then, that O'Grady should censure AE's dramatic efforts, particularly since Deirdre embodies so much of its author's nationalism.

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[64] AE, "Nationality or Cosmopolitanism" (1899), Imaginations and Reveries (Dublin: Maunsel, 1915), p. 19.

In his interpretation of myth, Russell anticipated the theories of Jung; he perceived the vital relationship of art, tradition and race which Yeats would later term Unity of Being:

> It will be found that the basis of nationality eludes us, unless there is agreement that the bond is psychic, that a nation is nothing but a collective imagination held with intensity, an identity of culture or consciousness among millions, which makes them act as a single entity in relation to other human groups. How, then, can historians ignore the great imaginations which have brought about this unity? What does it matter whether Cuchulain, Deirdre or Maeve ever lived or acted on earth, as legend relates of them? They are immortal and find bodies from generation to generation. What was in Padraic Pearse's soul when he fought in Easter Week but an imagination, and the chief imagination which inspired him was that of the hero who stood against a host. Though Cuchulain be as much mind-created as Hamlet, or Deirdre as Rosalind, yet to those who have been inspired by the first or moved to pity by the second they are real as flesh and blood.[65]

It is the imaginative truth, not the historical truth of myth which most influences a nation or an individual. Myth is a pattern of vital symbols which can be reworked and reshaped by modern artists, and not a dead historical curiosity. Its truths are relevant and alive:

> In so far as these ancient traditions live in the memory of man, they are contemporary to us as much as electrical science; for the images which time brings now to our senses before they can be used in literature, have to enter into exactly the same world of human imagination as the Celtic traditions live in. And their fitness for literary use is not there determined by their freshness but by their power of suggestion.[66]

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[65] AE, "The Antecedents of History", The Living Torch, ed. Monk Gibbon (New York: Macmillan, 1938), p. 134.

[66] "Nationality or Cosmopolitanism", Imaginations & Reveries, pp. 20-22.

Certainly no one could accuse Russell of fuzzy twilight thinking in this essay, even though his artistic works seldom bear out his theories. His use of Irish myth is usually more decorative than structural; in Deirdre the emphasis is placed on a superficial nationalism ornamented with mystical theories rather than on a more profound exploration of human truths.

Russell was at first enthusiastic about the possibilities of staging Irish myths, and planned to write several plays before his interest waned. Deirdre remains his only dramatic effort, whether he was discouraged by the attacks of O'Grady, or by his own lack of theatrical experience. It was the publication of Russell's play in O'Grady's All Ireland Review that drew the attention of the Fay brothers to the possibility of acting in a distinctly Irish play for an Irish audience, and occasioned their forming of the Irish National Dramatic Company with Yeats as president. Deirdre was first produced in 1902, and AE helped with costumes and scenery, and even acted the part of Cathvah. According to Joseph Holloway, it was not a resounding success, although he always preferred its noble heroic tone to the subsequent "peasant" version by Synge:

> There was quite a poetic glamour over AE's fanciful and beautiful rendering into dramatic form of the "Deirdre" legend, and the gauze curtain between the audience and the performers added much to the weird and dreamy effect of the play upon the listeners. . .

> Most of the performers chanted their lines after the monotonous method of the "Ghost" in Hamlet, and a few having very marked accents, the effect produced at times was not impressive, to put it mildly.[67]

From all indications Deirdre was produced as a "twilight" play, and is still remembered more for its poetry than for any dramatic merits.

The play reflects AE's two loves, spiritualism and nationalism. At first they are seen to be in conflict; the spirituality of Deirdre is basically antagonistic to the rigid political justice of Conchubar, but Russell effects a reconciliation through the agency of the myth itself. It is the immortalization of Deirdre's tragic love that will serve as a unifying national force, binding together the Irish in a common sympathy. AE uses myth in an overtly conscious way, not only for the substance of his story, but also as a raison d'être for the play itself. The effect which the myth, and by extension, the play, will have on modern Ireland is explicitly stated by the prophetess Levarcham, and by the nationally conscious Conchubar, so that the present relevance of the myth is emphasized continually. Russell is not retreating to a twilight world, but advancing a salient political message.

Deirdre's role, however, is primarily a negative one. She is a passive, suffering heroine, who lacks the necessary will or force of character to rise to the tragic heights of the heroines of both Yeats's and Synge's plays. For Russell, she is like an ephemeral member of the Sidhe, beautiful, immortal, close to the pastoral charms of nature. Deirdre's affinity with the beauties of her secluded world is emphasized from the beginning of the play. Russell felt strongly that the immortals were an earth-born race whose element was the beauty of nature, and he develops Deirdre according to these ideas. She dwells with the Sidhe, and sees with the visionary eyes of a goddess. Moreover, Conchubar has instructed Levarcham to teach her the ways of the Sidhe, so that, like the Maeve of Martyn's play, she will be immune to the superficial blandishments of earthly lovers:

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[67] Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre, Apr. 3, 1902, p. 16.

> If her thoughts turned only to the Sidhe, her heart would grow cold to the light love that warriors give. The Birds of Angus cannot breathe or sing their maddening song in the chill air that enfolds the wise. . . . Has she learned to know the beauty of the ever-loving ones, after which the earth fades and no voice can call us back?[68]

But, ironically, it is through the eyes of vision that Deirdre first sees Naoise; the immortals have revealed her destiny, despite the attempts of Conchubar to thwart the prophecy of destruction uttered at her birth. Moreover, Russell emphasizes through several characters that Deirdre is not responsible for the fate of the Red Branch. She, like the others, is simply a pawn in the hands of fate.

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[68] George Russell, Deirdre, (Chicago: De Paul University, 1970), p. 11. All subsequent quotations are taken from this text.

Nowhere does she take the initiative, as is the case in the manuscript stories. When Naoise appears, it is he who insists on defying the prophecy, with the conviction that "if the Red Branch must fall, it will fall through treachery." (Act I, p. 15) In his love for Deirdre there is no dishonour, nor any broken pledge. And Levarcham emphasizes that "Through her, but not through her sin, will come the destruction of the Red Branch." (Act I, p. 15)

Any stature that Deirdre achieves in Act I as a goddess of love, who defies all that fate can bring, is dissipated in the last two acts, which are pervaded with her fearful visions and lamentations. Although she, like the others, has an awareness of her own immortality through legend, that her suffering and death will transcend time, this knowledge is of no comfort to her: "I know the great gift we shall give to the Gael will be a memory to pity and sigh over, and I shall be the priestess of tears." (Act II, p. 19) Her death is more a fading away than a defiant assertion as is that of Yeats's Deirdre:

> My spirit is sinking away from the world. I could not stay after Naisi. After the lights of Valour have vanished, how could I remain? The earth has grown dim and old, foster-mother. The gods have gone far away, and the lights from the mountains, and the Lions of the Flaming Heart are still.
>
> (Act III, p. 30)

Russell takes great pains not to malign Conchubar nor cast him in the role of villain. The chief of the Red

Branch must be a noble warrior, worthy of the emulation of posterity. As does Yeats to a certain extent, he creates a personification of wisdom and justice, who emphasizes the necessity for inflexible law and order in a state to build up a stable unity. Because he feels that he cannot compromise political justice, he destroys the Sons of Usnach, and he is only temporarily swayed by arguments for mercy and love offered by a Portia-like Levarcham. He maintains that "the death of Naisi was only the fulfilling of the law. Ulla could not hold together if its ancient laws were set aside." (Act III, p. 30) He will not compromise his vision of a united Ireland even at the expense of civil war. The political relevance is obvious here, but to make doubly sure that his audience does not miss the point, Russell puts an even more explicit admonition in the mouth of Levarcham:

> Do you think to bind men together when you have broken their hearts? Oh, fool, who would conquer all Eri! I see the Red Branch scattered and Eri rent asunder, and thy memory a curse after many thousand years. The gods have overthrown thy dominion, proud king, with the last sigh from this dead child; and of the pity for her they will build up an eternal kingdom in the spirit of man.
>
> (Act III, pp. 30-31)

Like Yeats, Russell advocates a unity of the spirit, rather than a political unity for Ireland. Before a nation can be moulded, there must be a harmony of minds, an identification of ideals.

Despite Levarcham's resounding damnation, which aroused O'Grady to indignant protest over the vilification of Irish heroes, Russell does initially portray Conchubar as a fitting leader for the Red Branch, who errs only because of the curse of Macha. It is through him that the glories of the Red Branch heroes are built up as exempla of courage, honour and loyalty to inspire future generations:

> But through the ancient traditions of Ulla, which the bards have kept and woven into song, I have seen the shining law enter men's minds, and subdue the lawless into justice. A great tradition is shaping a heroic race; and the gods who fought at Moytura are descending and dwelling in the hearts of the Red Branch. Deeds will be done in our time as mighty as those wrought by the giants who battled at the dawn; and through the memory of our days and deeds, the gods will build themselves an eternal empire in the mind of the Gael.
>
> (Act I, p. 11)

Russell is obviously not interested in developing individualized character, but in portraying the ideals of Irish chivalry and its tragic demise. Consequently several aspects of his characters are scarcely credible: Conchubar's violent love for Deirdre, for example, and Naoise's stony pride. AE's Naoise is typical of many of the Deirdre adaptations especially that of Samuel Ferguson; he is a stalwart man of action, embued with too much pride, but with a strong love of country. Neither Naoise nor his brothers can be content with being exiles; the desire to live among their peers is too strong. Despite his assertive pride, however, Naoise comes to realize that all are pawns in the hands of fate, a lesson which he graphically learns while playing chess with Deirdre. The play is heavily weighted with this sense of fatality, the inevitable working out of Cathvah's prophecy at Deirdre's birth. Levarcham is particularly instrumental in sounding the note of doom and gloom, performing the function of a minor prophetess herself. This over-emphasis on fate, and the under-emphasis on the initiatives of individuals, impedes any sense of tragedy in the play.

Russell also fails in his attempts at tragic irony. He tries to heighten the tension of his play by liberally alluding to mythological deities or to analogous legends, such as "The Fate of the Children of Lir", and "The Sons of Tureann". As a result, the myth becomes at the same time more remote and more specifically Irish. The supernatural is again evoked for the death of Naoise, perhaps to facilitate a belief in the immortality of the lovers. James Joyce apparently found this particular scene humorous, as he repeatedly associates the invocation of Manannan with AE in the library episode of *Ulysses*.

Although several of the nationalistic allusions are heavy-handed and the characters somewhat stilted, AE's version of *Deirdre*, is by no means a failure and indicates a dramatic talent which might well have been developed. Yeats admired the construction of the play, even though he saw all male characters as resembling Lord Tennyson's King Arthur. When he wrote his own dramatic version of the Deirdre story, Yeats had moved beyond the mystical fantasies of the "twilight" period. The themes of withdrawal and enchantment of his early plays gradually harden to a more assertive heroic attitude and a more confident introspection.

# CHAPTER III

## BEAUTIFUL LOFTY THINGS

### W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge

Many times man lives and dies
Between his two eternities,
That of race and that of soul,
And ancient Ireland knew it all.
"Under Ben Bulben"

As W. B. Yeats solidified his ideas on the relationship between myth and drama, he attempted to develop a form of tragedy in which the characters would be universal symbols more than specific personalities. His tragic heroes would escape the limitations of their particular situations because they would be the embodiments of the reality of soul, which expresses itself through passion and energy:

> We, who are believers, cannot see reality anywhere but in the soul itself, and seeing it there we cannot do other than rejoice in every energy, whether of gesture, or of action, or of speech, coming out of the personality, the soul's image.[1]

Drama must therefore be the articulation of passion aroused to the extremities of joy and sorrow:

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[1] Yeats, "The Play, the Player and the Scene" (1904), Plays and Controversies (London: Macmillan, 1924), p. 124.

> The subject of all art is passion, and a passion can only be contemplated when separated by itself, purified of all but itself, aroused into a perfect intensity by opposition with some other passion, or it may be with the law, that is the expression of the whole whether of Church or Nation or external nature.[2]

In reacting against the social trivia of nineteenth century drama, and in emphasizing the high aesthetic ideals towards which great drama should strive, Yeats perhaps went to extremes in his insistence on the strictures of character. It is difficult to dramatize symbolic truths without the help of accessible human qualities which provide a means of communication or identification between actor and audience. Yet Yeats stressed early in his dramatic experiments that character rightfully belongs only to comedy:

> Character is continuously present in comedy alone, . . . there is much tragedy, that of Corneille, that of Racine, that of Greece and Rome, where its place is taken by passion and motives.
>
> . . . . . . . .
>
> Tragic art, passionate art, the drowner of dykes, the confounder of understanding, moves us by setting us to reverie, by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance. The poems upon the stage . . . greaten till they are humanity itself. We feel our minds expand convulsively or spread out slowly like some moon-brightened image-crowded sea.[3]

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[2] "First Principles" (1904), Plays and Contrcversies, p. 105.

[3] Yeats, "The Tragic Theatre" (1910), Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 240 & 245.

When he dramatized the Deirdre legend, Yeats was presumably concerned not with character or action, but with the "changes of state" of the soul, and the achievement of ecstasy "which is from the contemplation of things vaster than the individual and imperfectly seen."[4] Yeats tried to achieve the intensity necessary for such passionate climaxes through compression and simplicity of form, and by integrating the emotional potential of other art forms, such as music and dance. He strove for an art which was "essentially conventional, artificial, ceremonious,"[5] believing that whatever was lost in mass and power would be recovered in elegance and in subtlety.[6]

Yeats edited Lady Gregory's version of the Deirdre story to intensify the inherent tragic situation, but still considered his play true to the spirit of the myth. To achieve the condensation necessary for a one-act play he "selected certain things whch seem[ed] to be characteristic of the tale as well as in themselves dramatic, and [he] . . . separated these from much that needed an epic form or a more elaborate treatment."[7] Despite the influence of Cuchulain of Muirthemne, however, Yeats's play is closer in spirit to the Old Irish manuscripts, the Yellow Book of Lecan and the Book of Leinster, than is Lady Gregory's story, which incorporates the unrestrained emotionalism of the medieval manuscripts.[8] As do the more primitive redactions, Yeats's play emphasizes prophecy and fate, and de-emphasizes motivation. The tone is restrained, stark and simple. All narrative details are cut to the barest minimum and Yeats relies heavily on the introductory speech of the three musicians to set his play in a context of events and characters. At the same time he refrains from placing the action in a specific historical era; instead he suggests a timeless quality by setting up a series of mythic analogues. The pattern of this story is archetypal. As the first musician states, it has been told many times before, and is now in the process of yet another repetition:

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[4] Yeats, "Estrangement" (1909) Dramatis Personae (London: Macmillan, 1936), pp. 88-89.

[5] "The Play, the Player and the Scene", Plays and Controversies, pp. 126-127.

[6] Note on the First Performance of "At the Hawk's Well", Plays and Controversies, p. 418.

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[7] Yeats, Note for "Deirdre" (1906), The Variorum Edition of the Plays, ed. R. K. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 389.

[8] James Stephens prefers the more expansive and emotional versions of the Glen Masain Manuscript and the Turner Manuscript for his prose version of Deirdre (1923). As in his source material, his story commences "in medias res" with Conchubar discussing the flight of Naoise and Deirdre at a feast with the Red Branch. Stephens fully exploits the action and excitement of the final fight, and is highly successful at the "good story" method of adapting myth, so much so that his version is considered by many critics, including AE, to be the best of the many versions of Deirdre, despite the fact that it completely submerges the mythic values of the legend.

> I have a story right, my wanderers,
> That has so mixed with fable in our songs
> That all seemed fabulous.[9]

Later in the play Naoise consciously re-enacts the final moments of another great hero-lover of Irish myth, who chose to rise above the turmoil of vengeance and violence:

> What do they say?
> That Lugaidh Redstripe and that wife of his
> Sat at this chess-board, waiting for their end.
> They knew that there was nothing that would save them,
> And so played chess as they had any night
> For years, and waited for the stroke of sword.
> I never heard a death so out of reach
> Of common hearts, a high and comely end.
> What need have I, that gave up all for love,
> To die like an old king out of a fable,
> Fighting and passionate?
> (11. 431-442, p. 373)

Because Yeats develops his Irish analogues so fully, he achieves that reverberating quality of myth which AE misses in his play, despite his abundant allusions to Irish legends. Yet Yeats is not limited to national images; by obliquely alluding to thematically relevant Greek myths he gives his play an even broader dimension. Like Standish O'Grady he sees his characters in terms of Greek heroes: Deirdre is an Irish Helen, Naoise is her Paris, and Conchubar another Menelaus.[10] Certain key images take on wider repercussions from their association with Greek tragedies: the net that embroils Naoise, for example, recalls that which Clytemestra used to trap Agamemnon before she murdered him, and the burning cloak which Deianeira gave to Heracles. And as J. A. Byars points out in his discussion of the play,[11] Deirdre's appeal to Conchubar to allow her to pay homage to the dead Naoise, echoes a similar appeal made by Antigone to Creon.

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[9] Yeats, "Deirdre", 11 1-3, Variorum Plays, p. 345. All subsequent quotations from the play are taken from this edition.

[10] Yeats, Note to "Deirdre", Variorum Plays, p. 389.

Just as he strengthens the mythical qualities of the Deirdre legend, Yeats strengthens its tragic potential by casting it in a form similar to that of Greek tragedy. The three musicians form a chorus which provides the essentials of story outline, heightens the feeling of inevitable catastrophe, and gives alternative views of events. Most significantly, Yeats alters the traditional conceptions of the legend and its heroine to express his own conception of tragedy and its relation to mythic material. By extensively editing details from the story, eliminating Naoise's brothers, the sons of Fergus[12] and the prophetess-nurse whom AE relies upon so heavily, he concentrates the focus of the drama on the triangle situation of Deirdre, Naoise and Conchubar: "One woman and two men; that is the quarrel/ That knows no mending." (Deirdre, ll. 540-41, p. 378)

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[11] J. A. Byars, "The Heroic Type in the Irish Legendary Dramas," Diss. Chapel Hill 1963, p. 149.

[12] Fergus is the same dreamy philosopher king of Yeats's early poems, "Fergus and the Druid", and "Who Goes with Fergus". He is a bemused character unaware of human treacheries.

The impetus of the tragedy lies with Deirdre; the two men act as foils to the heroine, to bring her to the most intense moment of choice, which for Yeats constitutes the tragic climax. Conchubar, though driven by a remorseless passion, is always the strong wilful man, sure of his rights and fixed in his determination. Even Fergus's accusation of treachery and the revolt of his people cannot sway him from his conviction that only he is worthy of so great a queen as Deirdre:

> Howl, if you will; but I, being King, did right
> In choosing her most fitting to be Queen,
> And letting no boy lover take the sway. (ll. 757-59, p. 388)

Yeats evades the nationalistic associations which so compromised AE's portrayal of Conchubar and the lovers. His thematic concern here is much broader than nationalism.

Similarly his portrayal of Naoise admits of little depth or complexity. He is the proud fatalistic hero so typical of Irish legends, calm in the face of death until provoked by treachery and cowardice. He is denied tragic stature because he loses control of this calm will and succumbs to his emotions, and is caught, as a result, like a beast in a net.

It is through Deirdre, then, that the play moves to an intense climax of controlled passion which is resolved through the release of death. As Peter Ure so precisely puts it, "everything concentrates on the way the single

Mrs. Patrick Campbell in the title part of
Deirdre (a production in 1908)

heroic individual confronts her destiny."[13] The play is a graphic portrayal of the gradual intensification of heroic energy. But contrary to the opinions of several critics,[14] Deirdre is not simply a precursor of the heroic type defined by the Cuchulain plays. She is still very much a woman, who must learn to master her impulsive feelings in order to take control of the fate which has previously been manipulating her. During her first appearance in the play she is occupied with the typical female concern for appearance, and it is at once evident that her mind is in a state of turmoil; she is torn between the desire to please her husband, and her fear of the king. But at the same time, Yeats deliberately submerges the popular conception of Deirdre as a soulful, lamenting female, full of foreboding and sorrow. He refers only briefly to the well-known lament in the old legends, in which Deirdre bemoans her fate, and which Lady Gregory incorporates in its entirety in her version.[15] In an attempt to change what she fears to be an inevitable course of events, Deirdre assumes a number of roles, until in her final role she takes on the stature of a tragic heroine. Where her early roles fail, her final one succeeds, and through this triumph of will she attains a control over her fate:

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[13] Peter Ure, Yeats the Playwright: A Commentary on Character and Design in the Major Plays (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 47.

[14] Byars, in particular.

[15] The allusion is made through the word "clouds" in Deirdre's line, "The gods turn clouds and casual accidents/ Into omens." (Deirdre, ll 192-193, pp. 356-57).

> Now strike the wire, and sing to it a while,
> Knowing that all is happy, and that you know
> Within the bride-bed I shall lie this night,
> And by what man, and lie close to him,
> For the bed's narrow, and there outsleep the cock-crow.
> (ll. 728-32, pp. 386-87)

Before she takes her departure from the stage of life, she ensures that her story will be told aright through the songs of the musicians. The lamenting is left to others. Yeats's heroine refuses to indulge in self-pity as do those of Synge and Russell.

Ironically, then, the emphasis in Deirdre is on the character-development of the heroine, despite Yeats's theories of tragedy without character. Although there is a strong thematic emphasis on the all-subsuming power of love which can only be fulfilled through immortality, not sensual passion, the major focus of the play is decidedly on the heroine. Moreover, Yeats refuses to rely on the mythical trappings which might allow him to avoid this concentration on character. He omits the prophecy made at Deirdre's birth that she will bring destruction to the Red Branch; he deliberately clouds her origins, and minimizes any fatalistic elements in the meeting of Deirdre and Naoise. His emphasis on her extreme beauty is more an extension of his own theories of the relationship of beauty, suffering and violence than it is a specific allusion to the Irish legend. Moreover, Yeats's dissatisfaction with an earlier version of the play stems from his impressions that it was too mechanical, "that it was still mere bones, mere dramatic logic . . . there is rhetoric and logic and dry circumstance where there should be life,"[16] and it was not until the leading role was filled by Mrs. Patrick Campbell, a strong character actress, that he felt happy with the play. Perhaps Deirdre succeeds precisely where the tragic theories fail, and Yeats is a better dramatist than his ideals might allow. Elizabeth Coxhead underlines the fallacy in Yeats's theories in her book on Lady Gregory:

> Great tragedy certainly universalizes character, but then so does great comedy. The persons of a play must be real as individuals before they can be real as types and symbols; to take a short-cut to the symbol will answer for a lyric writer, but not for a dramatic one. What matters, both for tragedy and for comedy, is to avoid triviality of character.17

John Millington Synge disliked the first Abbey Theatre production of Yeats's Deirdre, primarily because he considered the principal actress inadequate for the emotional requirements of the play: "Emotion - if it cannot be given with some trace of distinction or nobility - is best left to the imagination of the audience."[18] However, Synge shared Yeats's interest in the tragic story of Deirdre and the sons of Usnach. Like Yeats he found in such legends the means to express a "higher nationalism," which was free of patriotic or political thought. He was sharply critical of the naive and hypocritical ideals of such "nationalists" as Arthur Griffith, who attacked his play, In The Shadow of the Glen for being anti-Irish. In a short farce entitled National Drama he satirized such critics and outlined his own conception of a national drama, one which echoed the aspirations of Yeats:

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[16] Notes (1908), Variorum Plays, p. 391.

[17] Elizabeth Coxhead, Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait (London: Secker & Warburg, 1966), p. 100.

[18] Synge, Letter to Lady Gregory, 13 Dec. 1906, Some Letters to Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1971), p. 44. Yeats had a similar criticism to make of Molly Allgood in the role of Synge's Deirdre.

> [Irish drama should] catch the beauty and loveliness of Ireland, as the Irish music has caught it without knowing or thinking, and will escape the foolishness that all wilful nationalism is so full of. . . . The national element in art is merely the colour, the intensity of the wildness or restraint of the humour. . . . If it is good art it is vain for you to try and show that it is not national. . . . The essentials of all art are the eternal human elements of humanity which are the same everywhere.19

However, Synge's interest in mythic material did not date from his association with Yeats. Even in early childhood he lived in the exciting world of legend and myth:

> I was a sort of poet with the frank imagination by which folk lore is created. I imagined myself half human monsters that went through series of supernatural adventures of which I kept a record. I do not think this legendary instinct was suggested by fairy tales. We knew Grimm's alone, and our myths had no relation with the domestic instincts of the Germans.20

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[19] Synge, "National Drama: A Farce", Collected Works III, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 224-25.

[20] Synge, "Autobiography", Collected Works II, ed. Alan Price (London, Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 5.

While at Trinity College he developed an interest in Irish antiquities and studied Gaelic, to the degree of proficiency that he could roughly translate The Children of Lir and Diarmuid and Grania. After renouncing the church he delved into everything Irish he could find, and like Yeats was initially impressed by the poets of the Spirit of the Nation:

> Everything Irish became sacred . . . and had a charm that was neither human nor divine, rather perhaps as if I had fallen in love with a goddess, although I had still sense enough not to personify Erin in the patriotic verse I now sought to fabricate. . . . Patriotism gratifies Man's need for adoration and has therefore a peculiar power upon the imaginative sceptic.[21]

However, at this point Synge had no specific political motivation and no contact with the incipient literary movement in Dublin. It was in Paris that he met Yeats, who reinforced his interest in primitive Celtic peoples, and through Yeats and Maud Gonne he met D'Arbois de Jubainville, with whom he studied comparative Celtic mythology in 1896 and Old Irish in 1900. He also read Breton folklore and became interested in Anatole Le Baz's attempts to establish a Celtic Theatre in Brittany to revive traditional drama.[22] In a review of de Jubainville's The Irish Mythological Cycle and Celtic Mythology, translated by R. I. Best, Synge expressed the same kind of belief in the universal significance of Irish myth as did Yeats:

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[21] Ibid., pp. 13-14.

[22] David Greene, "Synge and the Celtic Revival", Modern Drama, 4, No. 3 (Winter, 1962), 296.

> Irish mythology has been found to give, with the oldest mythology that can be gathered from the Homeric poems, the most archaic phase of Indo-European religion. . . .23

He also emphasized the Greek and Arthurian analogues, seeing Lugh the Long-handed as another Hermes, and Balor as a Chimaera, and the cauldron of the Dagda as the Holy Grail. In his preview of Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirthemne, however, he seemed more interested in the literary style and use of dialect, than in the substance of the legends, finding in this work an ideal idiom for his own dramatic purposes. Although he predicted that the impact of these epic tales of Cuchulain "should go far to make a new period in the intellectual life of Ireland",[24] he was particularly impressed by the Deirdre story, concurring with Lady Gregory's decision to omit the more barbarous features. It is probably this version, then, that brought to a head Synge's pervasive interest in Irish mythology.

Synge's attitude to Irish legend was conditioned by his contacts with such symbolists as de Jubainville and Rhys, not by the historical approaches of earlier Irishmen such as Ferguson and O'Grady. He considered all historical plays, novels and poems as relatively worthless, including

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[23] Synge, "Celtic Mythology" (1904), Collected Works II, p. 365.

[24] Synge, "An Epic of Ulster" (1902), Collected Works II, p. 367.

Idylls of the King, which is simply the "artificial retelling of saga story."[25] In 1907, while he was writing Deirdre of the Sorrows, Synge outlined his attitude to the dramatization of myth:

> Now it is impossible to use our own language or feeling with perfect sincerity for personages we know to have been different from ourselves. Hence Hist. Fiction insincere. It is possible to use a national tradition a century or more old which is still alive in the soul of the people see Walter Scott. . . . To us now as readers the old literature itself is so priceless we look with disgust at imitations of it. As creators? It is impossible to use a legend [such] as Faust which from the outset defies historical reality - in the making up of an absolutely modern work. [That] is only to be done possibly in verse, as our modern spoken prose cannot be put into the mouths of antique persons. On stage this is so most of all.26

Synge experienced many difficulties in writing Deirdre of the Sorrows, and he never did complete it to his satisfaction, a fact which causes definite critical problems. He had frequent doubts as to whether he should tackle a legend which had been interpreted by so many others before him,[27] and which might prove to be antipathetic to his style and artistic vision. In a letter to John Quinn (1908), he doubts that he will make a satisfactory play out of it:

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[25] Synge, "About Literature" (1908), Collected Works II, p. 350.

[26] Synge, "Historical or Peasant Drama" (1907), Collected Works IV, pp. 393-94.

[27] M. Bourgeois, John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre (London: Constable, 1913), p. 217. Bourgeois' extensive Appendix C gives an indication of how many versions of the Deirdre Saga had already been published. Denis Johnston takes a more sardonic attitude to the profusion of Deirdre plays:

> These saga people, when one comes to deal with them, seem very remote; one does not know what they thought or what they are or where they went to sleep, so one is apt to fall into rhetoric. In any case, I find it an interesting experiment, full of new difficulties, and I shall be the better, I think, for the change.[28]

He fully anticipates that his play will differ considerably from the Deirdre's of Yeats and Russell, but is "a little afraid that the 'Saga' people might loosen [his] grip on reality."[29] His impatience with the idealized treatment by others of Irish mythology is reflected in two abrasive little poems. In "Queens" (1902) he dismisses the heroic beauty of the past in favour of the more earthly beauty of his sweetheart:

> Seven dog-days we let pass
> Naming Queens in Glenmacnass,
> All the rare and royal names
> Wormy sheepskin yet retains.
> Etain, Helen, Maeve, and Fand,
> Golden Deirdre's tender hand,
>
> . . .
>
> Yet these are rotten - I ask their pardon -
> And we've the sun on rock and garden,
> These are rotten, so you're the Queen
> Of all the living, or have been.[30]

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"There was a time when Deirdre plays seemed to be becoming a public nuissance. We have Yeats's *Deirdre* and one by George Russell. We have Lyle Donaghy's *Deirdre and* Donagh MacDonagh's to mention a few of the more successful. There is even a cantata by Rolleston and Esposito, and there are about nine Scottish variants. (*John Millington Synge* ([London, 1965], p. 39-40)

[28] Synge, *Collected Works* IV, p. xxvi.

[29] *Ibid*., p. xxvii.

[30] Synge, *Collected Works* I, p. 34.

"The Passing of the Sidhe" appears to be even more critical of Yeats's preoccupations, since the name parodies "The Hosting of the Sidhe" although the poem is occasioned by one of AE's spiritualized paintings:

> Adieu, sweet Angus, Maeve and Fand,
> Ye plumed yet skinny Shee,
> That poets played with hand in hand
> To learn their ecstasy.
>
> We'll search in Red Dan Sally's ditch,
> And drink in Tubber fair,
> Or poach with Red Dan Philly's bitch
> The badger and the hare.[31]

Synge's ambivalent attitude towards Irish mythology will probably never be critically resolved, but at least there exists now a definitive text of the play, edited by Ann Saddlemyer for the Oxford University Edition of the Collected Works. Both Robin Skelton and J. A. Byars state that this version is preferable to that collated by Yeats, Lady Gregory and Molly Allgood for the first production by the Abbey in 1909, and which was published by the Cuala Press in 1910, since it considers variants undiscovered or unknown at the time of Synge's death.

Synge's play is in three acts as is AE's Deirdre, but it differs radically from both Yeats's and AE's in its general tone. Deirdre of the Sorrows depicts the same pagan primitive world as do Synge's other plays, a world of strong passions and sudden violence, bound by natural cycles and remorseless time. The forces of nature pervade the play:

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[31] Ibid., p. 38.

the acts follow the seasonal changes, and Deirdre's mood darkens with the passing of autumn's fruition and the arrival of winter's sterility. The inhabitants of this primitive world establish their social rituals in terms of nature: the marriage between Deirdre and Naoise, for example, is performed "By the sun and moon and the whole earth."[32] Human emotions are reflected in and heightened by natural phenomena. Synge's use of pathetic fallacy is particularly obvious in Act I where the incipient storm threatens Conchubar and heralds the arrival of Naoise at Deirdre's hut:

> Old Woman (at the window). There's a mountain of blackness in the sky, and the greatest rain falling has been these long years on the earth. The gods help Conchubar, he'll be a sorry man this night reaching his Dun, and he with all his spirits, thinking to himself he'll be putting his arms around her in two days or three.
> (Act I, p. 201)

The characters are seen more in terms of elemental emotional conflict, than as fully rounded individuals. Conchubar is defined in relation to his conflict with Deirdre, and his values are set in direct opposition to hers. Thus Synge chooses to emphasize his age, whereas both Yeats and Russell place him more in the heroic tradition of the mighty warrior-king. Conchubar's love is characterized by its jealous over-protectiveness, and, as many critics have pointed out,[33] his father/lover situation reflects Synge's own relationship with Molly Allgood. In fact, he wrote the part of Deirdre expressly for Molly, as his frequent letters to her testify.[34]

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[32] Synge, "Deirdre of the Sorrows", Act I, in Collected Works IV, ed. Ann Saddlemyer, p. 215.

[33] Robin Skelton analyses the play almost entirely in these terms in The Writings of J. M. Synge (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971), Chapter II.

Naoise is more typically the mythical hero, and Synge closely patterns his physical characteristics after the Red Branch warrior of the old legends: he is "a man with his hair like the raven maybe, and his skin like the snow and his lips like blood spilt on it."[35] However, Synge deviates considerably from his sources in portraying Naoise as a dashing lover of women, eager for the pursuit of pleasure and beauty. The sagas tend to stress the more heroic virtues of fighting and hunting. Synge also minimizes any internal conflict: Naoise does not so much regret deceiving Conchubar, as sacrificing his own pleasures.

That Synge feels some loyalty to his sources is indicated by the fact that he chooses to retain Ainnle and Ardan, when they have little dramatic function in his version: they serve only to reinforce his image of Deirdre as a heroine of such beauty and stature that she commands the devotion of all who surround her. All the other characters exist primarily in terms of Deirdre. In her Synge creates a virtuoso role which threatens to upset the balance of the play. She runs through the entire gamut of emotions, from the innocent exuberance of youth to the tragic outpourings of a heroic queen. Deirdre appears first as a Wordsworthian nature child, joying in the simple beauties of the seasons and radiating a freedom of spirit which such close proximity to nature instils in its worshippers. She is as much a part of the fluctuating seasons and transient beauties of the earth as she is a part of the immortal mythical world. The tension between mortality and immortality increases as does her awareness of the tragic choice she must make.

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[34] Synge, Letters to Molly: 1906-1909, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1971), pp. 210-211, 214-223.

[35] Cf. Standish O'Grady, History of Ireland I (New York: Lemma, 1970), p. 116: "Naysi was the most beautiful of the brothers, black as the raven were his eyebrows and curling hair, and white and ruddy his countenance." In The Writings of J. M. Synge, Robin Skelton interprets this description of Naoise solely in terms of Synge's own appearance, and builds a considerable argument for a personal identification between Synge and his hero on the strength of physical details which are obviously based on the description of Naoise in the source material.

Synge attempts to offset the fatalistic element so integral to the myth by emphasizing the more natural human conditions which affect the course of events for even the most insignificant individual. Deirdre's youth and beauty determine events more than any external manipulating fate:

> Who'd check her was made to have her pleasure only, the way if there were no warnings told about her you'd see troubles coming when an old king is taking her, and she without a thought but for her beauty and to be straying the hills. (Act I, p. 183)

The unnatural relationship between Conchubar and Deirdre will inevitably result in disaster:

> I'm in dread, so, they were right saying she'd bring destruction on the world, for it's a poor thing when you see a settled man putting the love he has for a young child, and the love he has for a full woman, on a girl the like of her.
>
> (Act I, p. 189)

Young love will have its own way, in spite of all obstacles:

> Isn't [it] a hard thing you're doing, but who can help it? Birds go mating in the spring of the year, and ewes at the leaves falling, but a young girl must have her lover in all the courses of the sun and moon.
>
> (Act I, p. 213)

Deirdre takes fate into her own hands when she instigates a meeting with Naoise. Like Yeats's Deirdre, she plays the role of a great queen to manipulate the wills of others, although there is in Synge's heroine an element of pathetic pretence:

> I will dress like Emer in Dundealgan or Maeve in her house in Connaught. If Conchubor'll make me a queen I'll have the right of a queen who is master, taking her own choice and making a stir to the edges of the sea. . . . I'll put on my robes that are the richest for I will not be brought down to Emain as Cuchulain brings his horse to yokes, or Conall Cearneach puts his shield upon his arm. And maybe from this day I will turn the men of Ireland like a wind blowing on the heath.
>
> (Act I, p. 199)

As Skelton points out in his analysis of the play, since Deirdre accepts her role as a victim of the gods, certain kinds of dramatic tension are impossible. "The interest of the play therefore now lies less in what happens, than in the attitudes of the characters towards the inevitable, and thus the drama becomes philosophical and psychological."[36]

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[36] Skelton, The Writings of J. M. Synge, p. 142.

In Act II Synge attempts to deal with the problems raised by the legend as to why the lovers returned from Alban to Ireland after safely escaping the vengeance of Conchubar. Like Lady Gregory and AE, Synge implies that love of country is a factor in the lovers' return, but he emphasizes the more personal reasons:[37] Deirdre's abhorence of old age, and her desire to immortalize love while it is at its peak. Her arguments resemble those used by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's Axel. The choice is for a qualitative rather than a quantitative existence, for a heroic defiance of the worst that life can inflict. In this respect, Deirdre is much like Yeats's Cuchulain.[38] But Deirdre's heroics are not consistent, and she vacillates between a defiance of fate, and an abject submission to it:

> Deirdre (without hope). There's little power in oaths to stop what's coming, and little power in what I'd do Lavarcham, to change the story of Conchubor and Naisi and the things old men foretold.
>
> (Act II, p. 217)

She and Naoise are impelled to return like migrating birds; they have no real choice. In the end Deirdre is not entirely sure herself why they are returning.

Act III continues in this mood of resignation and despair, and there is little dramatic tension. Synge attempts to heighten the irony and tragedy of the situation through the interjection of an unlikely scene of reconciliation between Conchubar and the lovers. In the subsequent quarrel between Naoise and Deirdre, Synge introduces another interpretation of the myth: faced with the harsh reality of the death which he has brought upon his brothers, Naoise bitterly condemns the ideals of female love and beauty, which lure men to their destruction. This negative theme may in fact be implicit in the myth of Deirdre, although it is rarely developed explicitly. Denis Johnston's interpretation of the story, however, emphasizes this "peculiarly Irish attitude toward women that they are 'killers'",[39] who inspire men to acts of violence that usually end in some form of disaster. The archetypal Irish woman is of course Cathleen ni Houlihan.

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[37] Synge stringently edited the more patriotic speeches of this part of early versions of the play.

[38] J. A. Byars develops this comparison fully in "The Heroic Type in the Irish Legendary Dramas", Chapter III.

Naoise's death almost destroys Deirdre, and she becomes totally absorbed in her own misery. Synge's over-indulgence in emotionalism at this point threatens to weaken the dramatic interest, and it is not until Deirdre is prodded out of her self-absorption by the arguments of Fergus and Conchubar into a form of heroic assertion that an equilibrium is established. She is again fully conscious of her mythical dimensions, and of the repercussions her story will have in time. Like Yeats's Deirdre she rises to a final triumph over time. She sees her death as unmitigated tragedy: "it's a pitiful thing . . . yet a thing will be a joy and triumph to [the] ends of life and time." (Act III, p. 269) It is not surprising that Yeats should be impressed by such a declamation, since it expresses his own tragic theories so eloquently. He considers the third act the best in the play, particularly since it alone had satisfied the author:

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[39] Denis Johnston, John Millington Synge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 40.

> 'Is it not a hard thing that we should miss the safety of the grave and we trampling its edge?' That is Deirdre's cry at the outset of a reverie of passion that mounts and mounts till grief itself had carried her beyond grief into pure contemplation. Up to this the play had been a Master's unfinished work, monotonous and melancholy, ill-arranged, little more than a sketch of what it would have grown to, but now I listened breathless to sentences that may never pass away, and as they filled or dwindled in their civility of sorrow, the player, whose art had seemed clumsy and incomplete, like the writing itself, ascended into that tragic ecstasy which is the best that art - perhaps that life - can give. . . . We too were carried beyond time and persons to where passion, living through its thousand purgatorial years, as in the wink of an eye, becomes wisdom; and it was as though we too had touched and felt and seen a disembodied thing.40

Regardless of the strength of Deirdre's final speech, however, the ending of the play is anti-climactic, and worse, a denial of the very values which the play has developed. Fergus's comment that "Deirdre is dead and there is none to keen her" is not only false in terms of the situation established within the play, but false to the emotional repercussions of Deirdre's death. The restoration of peace between Conchubar and Fergus is a neat bit of tidying up after the event, but it goes against the central theme of the legendary material, that Deirdre's tragic story is the

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[40] Yeats, "The Tragic Theatre", Essays and Introductions, p. 239.

initial cause of the destruction of the Red Branch. Moreover, Synge reserves his final sympathies for Conchubar, thus detracting from the stature of the heroine he has so intently developed in the course of the play.

The major criticisms of the play, however, have centred around Synge's degradation of the heroic by casting it in the form of "peasant drama". Certainly the "low" speeches of Lavarcham and of Owen are earthy and colloquial, but the central figures remain intact as "higher" images of the heroic and the tragic. Synge intended that the play be "quiet, stately, restrained", and Yeats sees it as beautiful and noble:

> And now by a strange chance, for he began the play before the last failing of his health, his persons awake to no disillusionment but to death only, and as if his soul already thirsted for the fiery fountains, there is nothing grotesque, but beauty only.[41]

In his denial of the element of the grotesque in Deirdre of the Sorrows, Yeats completely disregards the function of Owen in the play, even though he acknowledges Synge's intentions for this character in his Preface for the Cuala edition:

> Synge felt that the story, as he had told it, required a grotesque element mixed into its lyrical melancholy to give contrast and create an impression of solidity, and had begun this mixing with the character of Owen.[42]

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[41] Yeats, "Preface to the First Edition of John M. Synge's Poems and Translations," Essays and Introductions, p. 310.

[42] Yeats, Preface to Deirdre of the Sorrows (1910; rpt. Churchtown: Cuala Press, 1971).

Perhaps the introduction of Owen is Synge's attempt to offset the play's idealism, to give the poetry "strong roots among the clay and worms."[43] Owen shows to Deirdre the spectre of age and death:

> Queens get old Deirdre, with their white and long arms going from them, and their backs hooping. I tell you it's a poor thing to see a queen's nose reaching down to scrape her chin.
>
> (Act II, p. 233)

But his thematic function is overly contrived and he fails to become a fully integrated character.

This tenuous balance between the heroic and the mundane unnerved Yeats during the first performance of the play. He doubted that the audience would understand even such minor departures from heroic convention as the costuming, which was intended to complement the "rough peasant words", "to vary the heroic convention with something homely or of the fields."[44] Joseph Holloway found the play a vulgarization of the beautiful legend. He thought that the loftiness of the theme was trailed in the mud, and the treatment took the grandeur and poetry out of the tale.[45]

Holloway's dismissal of Deirdre of the Sorrows as another of Synge's "peasant plays" is still unconsciously echoed by those critics who would classify Synge as the originator of the school of naturalistic folk drama. But, in point of fact, none of Synge's plays can be simply dismissed as close observations of peasant life. Whether he is recasting an old Irish legend, or expressing the deeply rooted myths and customs of Ireland, Synge is essentially a mythopoeic dramatist, creating universal myth from particular experience.[46]

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[43] Synge, Preface (1908), Plays and Poems, ed. T. R. Henn (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 288.

[44] Yeats, "The Death of Synge" (1909), Dramatis Personae, p. 142.

[45] Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre, ed. R. Hogan and M. O'Neill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois U. Press, 1967), p. 134.

Those dramatists who reinterpreted the old legends were particularly attracted to the tragic women of Irish myth, Maeve, Grania and Deirdre. These heroines have been regarded as variant manifestations of the spirit of Ireland, Cathleen ni Houlihan. Yeats prefered to regard his Deirdre as a type of heroic character more than as a national symbol. It is through the figure of Cuchulain, however, that he most fully develops his conception of the heroic values inherent in Irish myth. He first attempts to recreate the complex image of a mythic hero in On Baile's Strand, a hero with universal, national and personal significance. For Yeats, Cuchulain incarnates man's search for perfection: he is semi-divine, the son of Lugh and Dectira, driven by a desire to attain full immortality, defiantly struggling against insurmountable odds. Yeats's Cuchulain is a proud, wilful, aggressive, and doomed tragic hero. With the certainty that his life is short, he pursues his pleasures and trials vehemently, yet with a certain innocence that makes him beloved of women. Yeats tries to retain both the primitive roughness of the heroes of the Irish legends, while reshaping Cuchulain into an aristocratic culture hero with high ideals.

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[46] George Fitzmaurice, Bryan MacMahon, John B. Keane and Michael Molloy approximate Synge's perception of the pagan vitality and earthy primitivism of the folk tradition. See Appendix B.

The mythic hero is also a national hero. Yeats recognizes Ireland's preoccupation with a saviour figure who would embody the best of national ideals without belonging to a specific group. The legendary Cuchulain admirably meets these requirements. He is a solitary man, alienated to a certain extent from his own society, but with a complete loyalty to his social commit~~t~~ments. Most important, he is the sole instrument in the defence of Ulster against the invading forces of Maeve, and overcomes impossible odds to save his country.

Yeats chose not to pursue his initial conception of Oisin as a hero figure, even though Oisin could embody both his heroic and his aesthetic values. In The King's Threshold he creates in Seanchan the type of hero-poet who makes the choice between an assertive, exacting life of freedom and the easy comforts of a more domestic existence. Both Seanchan and Cuchulain are part of "that great race/ That would be haughty, mirthful, and white-bodied,/ With a high head, and open hand."[47] Their pride is a kind of defiant assertion, a passion for personal integrity and self-fulfillment which leads to self-destruction.

In Yeats's plays, however, Cuchulain is most obviously a symbol, a mask through which Yeats projects his more personal aspirations and emotions.[48] In his Autobiographies he speculates on the subjectivity of his vision of the hero; it may be founded on little more than the memory of his grandfather, William Pollexfen, an adventurer and traveller, a proud, solitary, silent, yet naively innocent man,[49] an incarnate King Lear. Most important, Yeats wants to eschew any connotations of dreamer or idealist in his hero, associations which belong more to the Oisin of his early poem. Cuchulain is an active fighting man.

On Baile's Strand was intended as one of a series of plays on the life of Cuchulain, which if placed in chronological order would run: At the Hawk's Well, The Green Helmet, On Baile's Strand, and The Only Jealousy of Emer. However, they were never planned for performance in one evening, since they would be best produced on three different kinds of stage,[50] and since each play was eventually written from a different point of view. The explicit allusions in The Death of Cuchulain also indicate that Yeats considered these plays as part of a coherent series. Most of the salient characters are brought together for the final curtain. In his continual efforts to bring the tangle of mythic material into cohesive form for artistic expression, Yeats ordered events and changed characters to suit the needs of his plays. He saw an inexhaustible supply of raw material in the old legends, particularly as they were formulated by Lady Gregory "if the first phase of [their] dramatic movement had lasted, [he] would have dramatized other episodes from [Cuchulain's] life."[51]

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[47] Yeats, "The King's Threshold", ll. 717-19, Variorum Plays, p. 301.

[48] In The Interpretation of the Cuchulain Legend in the Works of W. B. Yeats (Upsala: Lundquist, 1950) Birgit Bjersby stresses the subjective element in Yeats's hero and neglects the more objective aspect of Cuchulain as a symbol.

[49] "Reveries over Childhood and Youth", Autobiographies, p. 6 ff.

Although in Deirdre, Yeats attempted to submerge character in an expression of intense passion, in On Baile's Strand, first conceived before he formalized his tragic theory, he was primarily concerned with an exploration of character, a reaction to the remoteness and impersonality of The Shadowy Waters.[52] Details of plot and character are taken from Lady Gregory's version, "The Only Son of Aiofe", but Yeats is already formulating a specific conception of the hero which alters little in emphasis in the later plays. He carefully builds a background of supernatural feats and glorious victories for Cuchulain, establishing him as a popular hero who is fully aware of his own fame:

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[50] Yeats, Preface to Plays in Prose and Verse (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. vi.

[51] Yeats, Note to "The Only Jealousy of Emer" (1932), Variorum Plays, p. 572.

[52] Yeats, Letter to Frank Fay, 20 January 1904, The Letters, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 425.

> And I must be obedient in all things;
> Give up my will to yours; go where you please;
> Come when you call; sit at the council-board
> Among the unshapely bodies of old men;
> I whose mere name has kept this country safe,
> I that in early days have driven out
> Maeve of Cruachan and the northern pirates,
> The hundred kings of Sarcha, and the kings
> Out of the Garden in the East of the World.[53]

Cuchulain is consciously creating a myth in his own lifetime, seeking immortality through intensity of life:

> Concobar. He burns the earth as if he were a fire,
> And time can never touch him.
>
> Cuchulain. And so the tale
> Grows finer yet.
> (On Baile's Strand, ll. 238-240, p. 481)

He professes not to be concerned with the inferior substitute for immortality which descendents provide; he will leave his name upon the harp. Nor does Yeats ignore the legendary emphasis on Cuchulain's amatory exploits, and here diverges markedly from Lady Gregory and Standish O'Grady, both of whom despatch the hero to the moral safety of domestic tranquility. In fact, Yeats creates suitable wives and mistresses for his hero as his themes require; in this case there is no mention of a loyal Emer; Cuchulain has found temporary fulfillment through Aiofe, in a passion aroused by a brief conciliation of opposites.

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[53] Yeats, "On Baile's Strand", ll. 216-224, Variorum Plays, p. 479. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

The basic conflict in the play, that between a desire for a free, active, assertive life, and the need for harmony and order in society, is common to many of Yeats's plays. Even when the heroic is repressed by the exigencies of the community, it will inevitably break out again to fulfil itself in passionate, defiant rebellion against restraint. In On Baile's Strand Cuchulain's own son impels him to break the confining oath of loyalty and thus enables him to attain the extremities of passion.

Yeats uses the hawk as a symbol of Cuchulain's semi-divine nature, drawing on the same archetypal associations as he does in "Leda and the Swan" and "The Mother of God". The hawk image has more specific associations with Irish legend, which Yeats more fully elaborates in his story of "The Wisdom of the King"; the hawk's feathers connote visionary insight or spiritual wisdom. And it is this wisdom which Cuchulain seeks in his pursuit of the hawk in At the Hawk's Well, and not that practical wisdom which Conchubar would impose:

> What's wisdom to the hawk, when that clear eye
> Is Burning nearer up in the high air?
> (ll. 480-81, p. 503)

Yeats chooses the folk version of Cuchulain's death for this play because it is an appropriate expression of the achievement of the heroic state. Only by warring against the indestructible powers of nature can Cuchulain vent the extremes of passion which the death of his son arouses: "Cuchulain in the Irish folktale had the passion of victory, and he overcame all men and died warring upon the waves, because they alone had the strength to overcome him."[54]

The fool and the blind man provide an effective contrast to this heroic world, functioning as an ironic chorus. They are images of the inadequacies of modern society, as is the blind man in The Death of Cuchulain. Their quarrels mirror the heroic struggle between Conchubar and Cuchulain, but they are also a comment on the petty discords of a world divorced from the higher values of the spirit. Their partial knowledge of circumstances and characters deepens the sense of fatalism which is an integral part of Yeatsian tragedy as it is in Greek tragedy, and their intrusion into the world of Irish myth helps to shape a tragic pattern which is only mildly suggested in the early legends. Moreover, by balancing the heroic with the mundane, Yeats finds an ideal aesthetic distance from his mythic material, avoiding the artificiality of over-stylization, and the familiarity of colloquialism. On Baile's Strand achieves an emotional veracity and involvement which is lacking in the more ritualized dramas, and although it is the least original in form, it is the most dramatically effective version of the Cuchulain plays.

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[54] Yeats, "Ideas of Good and Evil", quoted from Bjersby, p. 28.

In The Green Helmet Yeats approaches his mythic sources from a comic point of view, broadening the latent humour of Lady Gregory's stories of "Bricrui's Feast" and "The War of the Words of the Women" into farce. But he insists on a heroic treatment of farce: Cuchulain provides a heroic touchstone for the foibles and absurdities of the other characters. However, Yeats indicates in his dramatic theories that farce, like tragedy, is not concerned with characterization. The protagonists of The Green Helmet are all broadly drawn, stylized figures. Even Cuchulain, who attains the stature of the archetypal Irish hero by the end of the play, is not the complex dissident of On Baile's Strand, but a harmonious embodiment of courage and generosity.

This "farcical" rendering of Irish myth may be as true to the spirit of the source material as are the more tragic interpretations. Certainly the original sources are so divergent in tone and mood, it is erroneous to assume, as do O'Grady and Ferguson, that the point of view is primarily heroic and nationalistic. Because of the considerable element of the grotesque and absurd in the stories, there is much leeway for differing approaches in dramatic or poetic adaptations, as Yeats readily recognizes.

He freely modifies the content of Lady Gregory's two chapters in Cuchulain of Muirthemne, telescoping two episodes into one, and combining the figures of Bricrui, the original instigator of the conflict amongst the heroes, and Cu Roi, who arranges the tests to determine the Champion of Ulster. The Red Man is a highly stylized combination of characters, a mythological being from the world of the Shape-Changers whose task it is to periodically establish Ireland's champion. Yeats thus enlarges on the symbolic potential of of his sources, while strengthening allusions to the analogous myth of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

To reinforce this atmosphere of symbolic reality, Yeats stylizes character, action, scenery and costumes. He has "noticed that the more obviously decorative is the scene and costuming of the play, the more it is lifted out of time and place, and the nearer to faeryland do we carry it."[55] The solid colours of the actors' costumes are set against the less defined background of "a misty, moonlit sea". As in On Baile's Strand Yeats is suggesting the timeless, spaceless dimension of myth.

However, the humour of the play counteracts any tendency towards mysticism. The fearsome Red Man presents himself as the figment of a drunken dream, a lover of sport and games:

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[55] Note to "The Green Helmet" (1908), Variorum Plays. p. 454.

> So you too think me in earnest in wagering poll for poll!
> A drinking joke and a gibe and a juggler's feat, that is all,
> To make the time go quickly - for I am the drinker's friend.
> The kindest of all Shape-Changers from here to the world's end,
> The best of all tipsy companions.[56]

Nor does Cuchulain take him very seriously, seeing him primarily as a mischievous creator of discord, and refering to him as "Red Herring" and "old Radish". Cuchulain himself is a joyous young man, who readily accepts every available challenge with a smile and a jest. He mocks the fears of Laegaire and Conall, and adopts a familiar, almost irreverent attitude to the old gods. Here Yeats emphasizes his conception of the mythical Cuchulain as "creative joy separated from fear", a conception which he retains even in the more sombre of the tragedies.

In The Green Helmet Cuchulain is a fully defined character; he is not concerned with resolving inner discord, but with establishing peace and harmony within his discordant society. The nationalistic allusions are obvious: Ireland is in a continual state of conflict which can be settled only by a mythical redeemer figure, in this case Cuchulain, suitably attired in a green cloak. The theme of strife is recurrent in the play. Conall first delineates the condition of the country to which Cuchulain returns from Scotland: "Here neighbour wars on neighbour, and why there is no man knows." (l. 16, p. 423)

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[56] "The Green Helmet", ll. 126-130, Variorum Plays, p. 435. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

Ireland is an unlucky country "that was made when the Devil spat." (l. 48, p. 427) The contention amongst the three heroes is reflected in the lower orders of wives and servants, and finally reaches a climax of noise and confusion when all three groups become embroiled in verbal and physical battle. Cuchulain tries three times to restore order to the warring factions, and finally succeeds when he offers himself as a propitiatory sacrifice to the Red Man, thus proving his undeniable right to the Champion's Portion.

Cuchulain is overtly conscious of his national and mythical status: he acts out his part for posterity, willing to sacrifice an ephemeral life of action and pleasure for an life immortalized by song and story:

> Alive I have been far off in all lands under the sun,
> And been no faithful man; but when my story is done
> My fame shall spring up and laugh, and set you high above all.
> (ll. 265-67, pp. 451-52)

Nor will he have Emer unsurp his prerogative to this heroic role, and he sternly relegates her to a subservient position. Her melodramatic suicide attempt will only serve to undercut his own grand gesture. Yeats's conception of Emer in this play differs greatly from that in The Only Jealousy of Emer: she is almost a parody of feminine heroism in The Green Helmet. Cuchulain's marital infidelities are dismissed as trivialities. His heroic qualities as defined by the Red Man are not subject to nice moral issues, but are contingent upon freedom and joy, ideals which are now preserved only through heroic legend:

Red Man. And I choose the laughing lip
That shall not turn from laughing, whatever rise or fall;
The heart that grows no bitterer although betrayed by all;
The hand that loves to scatter; the life like a gambler's throw;
And these things I make prosper, till a day come that I know,
When heart and mind shall darken that the weak may end the strong,
And the long-remembering harpers have matter for their song.
(ll. 278-84, p. 453)

In At the Hawk's Well Yeats experiments with a dramatic form which he considers more suitable for the presentation of myth than is farce. Because he chooses to write the play for a small audience in a large room without the use of conventional stage techniques he can concentrate on the aesthetic impact of ritual and dance. To further distance his mythic material from the world of common reality, he adopts the formal conventions of Japanese Noh drama, an ancient theatrical art of dance and song which also draws upon myth for its stories.[57] Yeats casts Irish myth in increasingly larger mythical patterns. In At the Hawk's Well he presents Cuchulain as a universal heroic type by minimizing any dramatic devices which may limit him to a specific country or time. To escape any idiosyncrasies of character his players wear masks:

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[57] For a detailed discussion of these conventions see Donald Keene, No: The Classical Theatre of Japan (Tokyo Kodansha International, 1966); and for a close analysis of Yeats's use of Noh conventions see F. A. C. Wilson, Yeats's Iconography (London: Victor Gollancz, 1960), Chapter II.

> Then too the masks forced upon us by the absence of any special lighting, or by the nearness of the audience, who surround the players upon three sides, do not seem to us eccentric. We are accustomed to faces of bronze and of marble, and what could be more suitable than that of Cuchulain, let us say, a half-supernatural legendary person, should show us a face, not made before the looking-glass by some leading player . . . but moulded by some distinguished artist? . . . It would be a stirring adventure for a poet and an artist working together to create once more heroic or grotesque types that, keeping always at an appropriate distance from life, would seem images of those profound emotions that exist only in solitude and in silence.58

The play moves through image and symbol more than through action and conflict; it is a deliberately internalized work which demands the utmost in sympathy and imagination from its audience. Yeats was impressed by the first production of the play, but Sean O'Casey's reaction was considerably different, and he concluded that even the genius of Yeats could not assimilate such a vastly different tradition as Japanese Noh into the body of Irish myth:

> And so with the folding and unfolding of a cloth, music from a zither and flute, and taps from a drum, Yeats's idea of a Noh Play blossomed for a brief moment, then the artificial petals faded and dropped lonely to the floor, because a Japanese spirit had failed to climb into the soul of a Kelt. . .
>
> No; charming and amiable as it all was, it wasn't a Noh play. Poet and all that he was, Yeats wasn't able to grasp a convention, grown through a thousand years, and give it an Irish birth in an hour. Zither and flute and drum, with Dulac's masks, too full of detail for such an eyeless play, couldn't pour the imagination into the mind of those who listened and saw. The unfolding and

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[58] Yeats, Note on the First Performance of "At the Hawk's Well" (1916), Plays and Controversies, p. 417.

> folding of the fanciful cloth couldn't carry the stage to the drawing-room. No, the people's theatre can never be successfully turned into a poetical conventicle. . .[59]

Although Yeats deliberately wrote for an informed audience, only those people versed in "the traditional language of passion" who would have a knowledge of the myths and symbols he planned to use,[60] he did not draw his story from any specific Irish legend. Despite F. A. C. Wilson's elaborate contortions to prove the contrary,[61] there is very little indication that Yeats alludes to particular details of Cuchulain's life. The most plausible allusions to Irish mythology in the play are discussed by L. E. Nathan;[62] he looks at the central symbols in terms of Lady Gregory's description of the hazel trees and well sacred to the Tuatha de Danaan in Gods and Fighting Men:

> And they had a well below the sea where the nine hazels of wisdom were growing; that is, the hazels of inspiration and of the knowledge of poetry. And their leaves and their blossoms would break out in the same hour, and would fall on the well in a shower that raised a purple wave. And then the five salmon that were waiting there would eat the nuts and their colour would come out in the red spots of their skin, and any person that would eat one of these salmon would know all wisdom and all poetry. And there were seven streams of wisdom that sprang from that well and turned back to it again; and the people of many arts have all drank from that well.[63]

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[59] Sean O'Casey, "Inishfallen Fare Thee Well", Autobiographies II (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 233.

[60] "A People's Theatre" (1919), Plays and Controversies, p. 213.

[61] Yeats's Iconography, Chapter II.

[62] The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 172.

[63] Lady Gregory, Gods and Fighting Men (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smyth, 1970), p. 28.

Having written several dramatic representations of the heroic life in terms of action and deed, Yeats is now concerned with exploring the more internal workings of a hero figure, the heroic state of mind. The spiritual quality of Japanese Noh thus suits his purposes better than the concreteness of the Irish stories. The ritualized pattern of encounter which is the essence of Noh provides an ideal frame for his exploration of the moment of tragic choice.

Cuchulain is without a specific personality; he functions as a symbol, an embodiment of the Self questing for fulfillment through a deliberate choice of lives. Yet, he is still a recognizable figure, a confident, arrogant young warrior and lover of women, and there are enough general references to other figures in his legendary world to give him some definition. Yeats takes pains to link this play with other of his Cuchulain dramas; the old man's prophecy of a cursed future is fulfilled in part in On Baile's Strand, and in The Only Jealousy of Emer:

> That curse may be
> Never to win a woman's love and keep it;
> Or always to mix hatred in the love;
> Or it may be that she will kill your children,
> That you will find them, their throats torn and bloody,
> Or you will be so maddened that you kill them
> With your own hand.[64]

These allusions deepen the tragic irony and thicken the texture of the play, and are not the superfluous detail or

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[64] "At the Hawk's Well", ll. 173-79, Variorum Plays, pp. 407-8. All subsequent quotations are taken from this text.

"largely wasted ingenuity"[65] which F. A. C. Wilson considers them to be.

The status of Cuchulain as archetypal hero is further reinforced by the pattern of symbols on the play. Cuchulain pursues the hawk with an insatiable desire to possess the freedom of the gods, and he is at the same time closely identified with the hawk. The heroic spirit he unconsciously seeks is already a part of his nature, and the actual moment of choice is thus not a conscious one, but an impulse towards immortality which he already possesses. The hawk, as Bjersby indicates,[66] symbolizes nobility, loneliness, bravery, proud defiance, superhuman or divine power dangerous to mortals. It both allures and destroys. In actively pursuing his destiny, Cuchulain asserts his heroism and precipitates an early death.

An alternative way of life is that of peace, comfort and security, the kind of life sought by the old man in the play. Although Cuchulain had sought this life of endless peace and harmony, he fails in his conscious objective; instead he wins for himself a different kind of immortality, a place in the imaginations of the Irish. In his final defiant assertion, "He comes! Cuchulain, son of Sualtim, comes!" (At the Hawk's Well, l. 249), a strong positive note is sounded in the play.[67]

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[65] Wilson, Yeats's Iconography, p. 41.

[66] The Interpretation of the Cuchulain Legend in the Works of W. B. Yeats, p. 90.

The well and the tree, traditional symbols of life or immortality, are in a sense inverted in the play, for they are both dry and withered. The immortality they offer is that empty and tedious round of the quotidian:

> 'The man that I praise'
> Cries out the empty well,
> 'Lives all his days
> Where a hand on the bell
> Can call the milch cows
> To the comfortable door of his house.
> Who but an idiot would praise
> Dry stones in a well?'
>
> 'The man that I praise',
> Cries out the leafless tree,
> 'Has married and stays
> By an old hearth, and he
> On naught has set store
> But children and dogs on the floor.
> Who but an idiot would praise
> A withered tree?'
> (ll. 265-80, p. 413-14)

Only the active, heroic life is worthy of praise through legend and song. Yeats is in part accounting for the mythological significance of Cuchulain as hero.

In The Only Jealousy of Emer Yeats again structures his mythical material within the conventions of Noh, but develops a more personal pattern of images to express the conflict of the mortal with the immortal world, the war between the living and the dead. Although the source material is more readily identifiable than that of At the Hawk's Well, it is so radically altered and abbreviated as to become part of his own mythopoeic vision. Personal and mythical material have become interdependent; the substance of Irish legend has a significance only insofar as it fits into the totality of the poet's symbolic apprehension of reality. Yeats was aware of the difficulties which such an internalized technique presented in the theatre, and even though he was free of the "stupidity of an ordinary audience"[68] he doubted that this more esoteric form of theatre would succeed:

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[67] F. A. C. Wilson sees the play as essentially pessimistic, "the universalized statement of Yeats's own gathering despair." It is a play of consummate spiritual disillusion; its theme is that the search for the higher self is inevitably doomed to failure. (p. 59) Certainly Yeats, like T. S. Eliot in The Cocktail Party, indicates that a life of spiritual striving to achieve the fullest realization of self is necessarily a life of suffering and even early death, but this is not to deny the inherent value of such a life.

> In writing these little plays I knew that I was creating something which could only fully succeed in a civilization very unlike ours. I think they should be written for some country where all classes share in a half-mythological, half philosophical folk-belief which the writer and his small audience lift into a new subtlety.[69]

Yeats later rewrote The Only Jealousy of Emer in a prose form, Fighting the Waves, to free it from abstraction and confusion, and to render it more suitable for performance on a small stage, instead of in a private house. But Fighting the Waves relies heavily on the choreographic and musical talents of its producer, for Yeats substituted for poetic allusion the suggestiveness of song and dance. Form takes precedence over theme, the appeal is mainly to the ear and eye: "Fighting the Waves is in itself nothing, a mere occasion for sculptor and dance."[70]

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[68] Note on "The Only Jealousy of Emer", Plays and Controversies, p. 433.

[69] Ibid., p. 434.

The Only Jealousy of Emer is more intellectually demanding, and Yeats requires of his audience a knowledge of the complexities of the Irish source as found in Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirthemne, an acquaintance with the symbolic interpretation of Irish myth as outlined by John Rys and de Jubainville, and some understanding of his own theories of the beautiful and the heroic. In an extensive Note appended to Lady Gregory's work, Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland (1920),[71] Yeats indicates how he interprets the story of Cuchulain and Fand as it is found in The Book of the Dun Cow. Unlike Professor Rys, who interprets the legend as a solar myth, he sees this story as another variation of the divine substitution myth, which has analogues in all mythologies, including those of China and Japan. After an extensive paraphrase of Lady Gregory's story in Cuchulain of Muirthemne, Yeats concludes that "We have here certainly a story of trance and the soul leaving the body, but probably it has passed through the minds of story-tellers who have forgotten the original meaning."[72] When Cuchulain shoots the beautiful white bird for Eithne Inguba, he inadvertently gives Fand a love wound. The goddess desires fulfillment through a mortal and she lures Cuchulain into the land of the Sidhe by beating him with green rods, an action which Yeats interprets as giving Cuchulain the touch, for "In the Connacht stories the enchantment begins with a stroke, or with a touch from some person of faery, and it is so the women deal with Cuchulain."[73] The hero is thus obliged to follow Fand into the Country-Under-Wave where he fights many battles, for man is taken for the sake of his physical strength: "strength comes from men and wisdom from among Gods who are but shadows."[74] Cuchulain is finally restored to the mortal world through the determination and strength of Emer, who confronts Fand on the seashore and compels her to release Cuchulain. It is Fand not Emer, however, who makes the final decision in Lady Gregory's story:

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[70] Note to "The Only Jealousy of Emer", Variorum Plays, p. 567.

[71] Lady Gregory, Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smyth, 1970), pp. 359-364.

> "O Emer, the man is yours, and well may you wear him, for you are worthy; what my arm cannot reach, that at least I may wish well to . . . .
>
> "A pity it is to give love to a man, and he to take no heed to it. It is better to be turned away, if you are not loved as you love."[75]

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[72] _Ibid_., p. 364.

[73] _Ibid_., p. 363.

[74] _Ibid_., p. 364.

[75] Lady Gregory, "The Only Jealousy of Emer", _Cuchulain of Muirthemne_, p. 220.

That Yeats prefers to give Emer the difficult decision of renouncing Cuchulain is perhaps an indication that he wishes her to carry the tragic weight of the play, and not Fand, as some critics would maintain.[76]

Yeats's treatment of the legend is different from Lady Gregory's in other respects. He chooses to change the sequence of events which occasions Cuchulain's trance, the shooting of the white bird and the beating inflicted by Fand. Instead he writes his play as a sequel to On Baile's Strand: it is Cuchulain's fight with the waves which has resulted in his near death. This may be an oblique allusion to the hero's journey to the Country-Under-Wave in Lady Gregory's version, but the play exists quite independently, at least in this regard, from its source. For thematic and symbolic reasons of his own, Yeats prefers to characterize Cuchulain as an older man, tempered by time and compromised by human entanglements. He is neither the young idealistic hero of At the Hawk's Well, nor the ageless hero of the old stories. Moreover, he adds the god Bricrui and enlarges considerably on the significance of Eithne Inguba, who functions only briefly at the beginning of the story as Cuchulain's mistress. Both Bricrui and Eithne Inguba become part of the symbolic pattern of the play, and have little weight as characters. The total myth becomes a vehicle for Yeats's theories about the relationship between body and soul.

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[76] Specifically, F. A. C. Wilson in Yeats's Iconography, p. 120.

F. A. C. Wilson deals fully with the symbolic complexities of the play,[77] especially as the symbols relate to A Vision, but it is also possible to approach the imagery in the light of Irish myth, and of the patterns which Yeats has established in other poems and plays. The most pervasive atmospheric symbol in The Only Jealousy of Emer is that of the sea. It is the paradoxical matrix of life and death, the vast and unknown regions of the soul, from which mortality emerges. It can be regarded as Yeats's Anima Mundi, out of which are cast images to excite the creative mind:

> A woman's beauty is like a white
> Frail bird, like a white sea-bird alone
> At daybreak after stormy night
> Between two furrows upon the ploughed land:
> A sudden storm, and it was thrown
> Between dark furrows upon the ploughed land.[78]

As a part of the imaginative backdrop to the play, the sea suggests a vague primitive atmosphere, similar to that of On Baile's Strand and The Green Helmet. The supernatural elements which bring the hero to his heroic fate in The Green Helmet come from the sea, just as do Fand and Bricrui, the instruments of fate which force upon both Cuchulain and Emer decisions that will shape character and destiny.

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[77] Yeats's Iconography, Chapter III.

[78] Yeats, "The Only Jealousy of Emer", ll. 1-6, Variorum Plays, pp. 529 & 531. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition of the play.

Through repeated association with bird and moon imagery early in the play, Fand is established as an image of beauty which tempts Cuchulain to the ambivalent world of the immortals. She is not a fully rounded character, simply because she is intended only as an imaginative fabrication, an ideal which is never realized in the mortal world:

> She has hurried from the Country-Under-Wave
> And dreamed herself into that shape that he
> May glitter in her basket; for the Sidhe
> Are dexterous fishers and they fish for men
> With dreams upon the hook.
> (ll. 202-206, p. 549)

As a completely subjective being of the fifteenth phase of the moon, Fand requires fulfillment through the mortal world, which can only be achieved through the love of a man. Emer regards her attractions as similar to the luring songs of the Sirens:

> I know her sort,
> They find our men asleep, weary with war,
> Lap them in cloudy hair or kiss their lips;
> Our men awake in ignorance of it all,
> But when we take them in our arms at night
> We cannot break their solitude.
> (ll. 212-217, pp. 549 & 551)

However, Fand is not portrayed as being entirely evil; she is more like Niamh who called Oisin away to Tir na nOg, than like the hawk-woman in At the Hawk's Well. The hawk-woman arouses Cuchulain to his heroic destiny in the mortal world, while Fand promises the peace of complete oblivion.

Fand has many of the characteristics of the moon-goddess,[79] but she is more specifically a vehicle for Yeats's esoteric theories of beauty:

> I have filled The Only Jealousy of Emer with my convictions about the nature and history of woman's beauty. Much that I have written might be a commentary upon Castiglioni's [The Courtier] saying that the physical beauty of woman is the spoil or monument of the victory of the soul, for physical beauty, only possible to subjective natures, is described as a result of emotional toil in past lives.[80]

Eithne Inguba is also associated with these theories of subjective beauty. As Wilson points out, she is of the fourteenth phase of the moon, and therefore is an incomplete realization of beauty, but is still close enough to the ideal to entice men away from their more mundane social attachments. She belongs to the same phase as Helen, and is an ineffectual, unsympathetic figure, undeserving of the love Cuchulain feels for her.[81]

Although Yeats thinks of The Only Jealousy of Emer as part of his cycle of Cuchulain plays, and in Plays and Controversies (p. 332) he suggests that his initial intentions were centred around the dramatic possibilities of changing

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[79] Wilson cites the influence of William Larminie's nineteenth century poem, "Fand", and of the Japanese play Hagoromo, both of which involve a moon-goddess. Keats's Endymion also makes similar connections between the moon, beauty and the creative imagination.

[80] Plays and Controversies, p. 433.

[81] Yeats's Iconography, p. 110.

Cuchulain's personality through a change of mask, the tragic weight of the play falls on Emer not on Cuchulain. His mythic characteristics are emphasized, but he remains a passive character in the play. Emer emerges as a heroine similar in stature to Deirdre. In his preface to Cuchulain of Muirthemne, Yeats outlines his conception of Cuchulain's wife:

> If we do not set Deirdre's lamentations among the greatest lyric poems of the world, I think we may be certain that the wine-press of the poets has been trodden for us in vain; and yet I think it may be proud Emer, Cuchulain's fitting wife, who will linger longest in the memory. What a pure flame burns in her always, whether she is the newly married wife fighting for precedence, fierce as some beautiful bird, or the confident housewife, who would awaken her husband from his magic sleep with mocking words; or the great queen who would get him out of the tightening net of his doom, by sending him into the Valley of the Dead, with Niamh, his mistress, because he will be more obedient to her; or the woman whom sorrow has sent with Helen and Iseult and Burnnhilda, and Deirdre, to share their immortality in the rosary of the poets.[82]

Emer emerges in the play as a generous, warm, compassionate woman willing to subsume all differences with her rival in order to win Cuchulain back from death. She is placed in direct contrast to the selfish, timid Eithne Inguba, and to the cold ruthless Fand.[83] Her fidelity to Cuchulain provides an effective comment on his more fickle nature, as Fand points out:

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[82] Yeats, Preface to Cuchulain of Muirthemne, p. 16.

[83] In The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats, Leonard Nathan also emphasizes Emer's role as heroine.

Being among the dead you love her
That valued every slut above her
While you still lived.
(ll. 274-76)

Just as Fand forces upon Cuchulain an irrevocable decision, so Bricrui brings Emer to her tragic choice. Bricrui is the Irish god of discord, a Satanic figure bargaining for what is most valuable to Emer, her love for Cuchulain. Once she has renounced this love, then she will be "accursed", condemned to a life of striving after the impossible, like Cuchulain in At the Hawk's Well. Ironically, it is Bricrui in the form of Cuchulain who forces this decision upon her. He points to her husband's unfaithfulness, the result of his continual pursuit of ideal beauty.

But Emer belongs exclusively to the toils of the mortal world. She sees in the Sidhe only malicious deception and delusion, and consequently is restricted to a more mundane choice of lives, whereas Cuchulain is continually confronted with the choice between the immortal and the moral worlds. Although the dramatic climax centres around her conflict with Bricrui, the play is once more concerned with defining the nature of Cuchulain as mythic hero. Emer's apocalyptic vision of his death has the ring of Shakespearean tragedy, and evokes Standish O'Grady's conception of the hero of Ulster:

> Although they have dressed him out in his grave-clothes
> And stretched his limbs, Cuchulain is not dead;
> The very heavens when that day's at hand,
> So that his death may not lack ceremony,
> Will throw out fires, and the earth grow red with blood,
> There shall not be a scullion but foreknows it
> Like the world's end.
>
> (The Only Jealousy of Emer, ll. 57-63)

With each play in the Cuchulain cycle, Yeats moves further away from his source material in Cuchulain of Muirthemne and introduces an increasingly strong personal element into his conception of the central character. The Death of Cuchulain owes only the barest outlines to Lady Gregory's stories of "The Great Gathering of Muirthemne" and "The Death of Cuchulain." Eithne Inguba is substituted for Niamh as Cuchulain's mistress, and an anti-heroic blind man for Lugaid as the final instrument of death. Yeats completely eliminates the many omens of death which Cuchulain encounters on his way to battle. Any forshadowing comes through the introductory words of Eithne Inguba.

The Death of Cuchulain is the most introverted of Yeats's heroic plays. It is introduced by the poet's surrogate, an old man "looking like something out of mythology", who in a satirical tirade denounces the shallow tastes of the contemporary audience. Great art is timeless, and like that of Virgil, Homer and Milton, Yeats's art delineates the timeless world of myth. Moreover, the mythological or heroic age exemplified the subjective phase of life, when the supernatural and natural interpenetrated to make possible a Unity of Being. The Death of Cuchulain marks the end of this heroic age. Together with the song of the Street Singer, the old man's denunciation of the values of the modern objective phase comments on the significance of events in the play, and on the paradoxical nature of these events. Although the heroic life has died with Cuchulain, it is in some respects still alive, and manifests itself in the present through the deeds of individuals. The spirit of Cuchulain was alive in Connolly and Pearse, as Sheppard's statue of Cuchulain in front of the Post Office testifies. The heroic age belongs to the present and future as much as to the past, and it is Yeats's intention to dramatically portray its direct relevance. This he does most obviously by violently juxtaposing present and past, the harsh colloquialisms of the present framing the heroic gestures of the past.

Yeats attempts to give more weight to the significance of this little play by loading it with allusions to his other plays on the life of Cuchulain, and stipulates through the Old Man that the audience be familiar not only with the old epics, but with his plays about them. He deliberately integrates the characters and events of On Baile's Strand, At the Hawk's Well and The Only Jealousy of Emer to substantiate his vision of the heroic in this play. It is surprising, then, that he should insist in a letter to his friend Ethel Mannin that his work can operate successfully on the more superficial level of fable alone:

> My 'private philosophy' is there but there must be no sign of it; all must be like an old faery tale. It guides me to certain conclusions and gives me precision but I do not write it.[84]

This forced use of characters from the Cuchulain plays often detracts from the thematic development of The Death of Cuchulain. The summary of On Baile's Strand, for instance, is completely extraneous material, and the painfully explained introduction of Aiofe, whom Yeats rather facilely links with Fand and The Guardian of the Well, is too obviously contrived. Aiofe's appearance detracts from the the significance of Maeve, who is cast as Cuchulain's real enemy, as she is in the old legends, but Maeve remains a vague force in the background, and her machinations have little to do with the working out of fate in the play. This confusion of character and plot is not ameliorated by the summary speech of the Morrigu at the end of the play, which provides an explanation of Cuchulain's six death wounds.

The action moves through a series of confrontations between Cuchulain and his adversaries,[85] but apart from the initial exchange with Eithne Inguba where Cuchulain is described as a violent man who would forgive no treachery now mellowed by imminent death into a more solicitous, generous lover, these character confrontations do little to suggest any change in Cuchulain as he faces inevitable death. They simply provide a summary of his career as a lover of women, an indomitable fighter, a solitary spirit, and a victim of fools.

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[84] Yeats, letter to Ethel Mannin, 20 Oct. 1938, Letters, ed. Wade, p. 917.

[85] L. Nathan, in The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats, p. 197, points out the similarities of structure with Samson Agonistes and The King's Threshold.

The play concentrates on how the hero meets his death. Yeats's Cuchulain does not die as a violent man of action, but as a detached contemplative visionary, a man who like Naoise in Deirdre, "has passed beyond life." He meets his death with equanimity and peace of mind because he has known even before the battle that his fate was thus set down. He goes to battle fully aware of the consequences, and neither Eithne Inguba's false information, nor Emer's selfless gestures can dissuade him from pursuing his fate actively and aggressively:

> I am for the fight,
> I and my handful are set upon the fight;
> We have faced great odds before, a straw decided.[86]

It is only when he is near death that he achieves the objective transcendent state where he can "cast a cold eye on life, on death". The significance of the Morrigu is therefore doubtful, even though she claims to have "arranged the dance". Cuchulain is determined to meet his fate, not be manipulated by it, and there is no implication that by breaking his geas, he inadvertently occasions his death.[87] The act of heroism is the most complete and deliberate expression of character:

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[86] Yeats, "The Death of Cuchulain", ll. 28-30, Variorum Plays, p. 1054.

> Here in Ireland we have come to think of self-sacrifice, when worthy of public honour, as the act of some man at the moment when he is least himself, most completely the crowd. The heroic act, as it descends through tradition, is an act done because a man is himself, because, being himself, he can ask nothing of other men but room amid remembered tragedies; a sacrifice of himself to himself, almost, so little may he bargain, of the moment to the moment.[88]

Through death, more precisely through the ritual death of beheading,[89] Cuchulain achieves a spiritual apotheosis. He becomes in effect a symbol of heroism which cannot be destroyed by the sordid mundane existence exemplified by the blind man, and which is paradoxically realized through this objective phase. It is only in the extreme abstract stage of objectivity that the subjective phase can be initiated. Cuchulain is for Yeats the incarnation of his more personal ideals of character and of his national ideals for the spiritual freedom of Ireland. But in dramatically portraying his ideal Yeats avoids the easy pitfalls of aggrandizement and bombast which are so amenable to satirical reaction, as James Joyce discovered. Yeats's approach to his hero is cautious and ironically reserved, and he thus saves his vision of Cuchulain from the passing phases of patriotism and nationalistic upheaval. It is through this use of Cuchulain as a symbol of a quality of mind that Yeats avoids the parochial:

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[87] Bjersby tries to make a claim for the importance of Cuchulain's geas in The Interpretation of the Cuchulain Legend in the Works of W. B. Yeats, p. 24.

[88] Yeats, Note on "The Only Jealousy of Emer", Variorum Plays, p. 569.

[89] Nathan points out the analogues in the Dionysian myths of death and resurrection (p. 200).

> A knowledge of Irish history and legend will be neither a sufficient nor necessary cause of our understanding; this country of the mind is open to anyone who has the poetic habit of allowing the inchoate impulses of the soul to take on shape and sound in forms shared by many ancient mythologies.[90]

Cuchulain is also a facet of Yeats's mythopoeic world view, a heroic image which is another expression of the Anima Mundi. Since this "Divine Mind" is manifested through both personal and racial images, the poet can interfuse personal experience and inherited myth, and thus see through the eyes of the past as well as the present. In his insistence that myth should be a creative impulse for modern art, Yeats accords with the views of such writers as T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden and James Joyce. Because myths are timeless expressions of man's basic feelings, they are always valid:

> The Irish stories make one understand why the Greeks call myths the activities of the daemons. The great virtues, the great joys, the great privations come in the myths, and as it were, take mankind between their naked arms, and without putting off their divinity. Poets have taken their themes more often from stories that are all, or half, mythological, than from history . . . understanding . . . that the imagination which remembers the proportions of life is but a long wooing, and that it has to forget them before it becomes the torch and the marriage bed.[91]

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[90] J. R. Moore, Masks of Love and Death, p. 351.

[91] W. B. Yeats, Preface to Cuchulain of Muirthemne, p. xiv.

When the artist utilizes myth, he draws on the inherited strength of tradition:

> Supreme art is a traditional statement of certain heroic and religious truths, passed on from age to age, modified by individual genius, but never abandoned. The revolt of individualism came because the tradition had become degraded, or rather because a spurious copy had been accepted in its stead.[92]

Yeats thinks of himself as a participant in the continuum of poetic tradition, his work being constantly enriched by the impingement of the past:

> It is the old and far off that stirs us the most deeply. . . . Emotion . . . grows intoxicating and delightful after it has been enriched with the memory of old emotions, with all the uncounted flavours of old experience.[93]

By confining himself to an inherited subject-matter, Yeats hopes to grasp that elusive quality of man and race which he terms "Unity of Being", to counteract the fragmentation of art and society and the tendency towards abstraction. "A nation or an individual must give to all separated elements . . . a symbolical, a mythological coherence."[94]

Yeats's later views on the functions of myth reflect the growing tendency in the twentieth century towards Jungian archetypal criticism. But it must be emphasized that such grandiose claims of universality and profundity would be difficult to justify in terms of the raw material of the old Irish legends. Only after they have been shaped by the vision of an essentially mythopoeic artist such as Yeats or Synge can they take on such significance.

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[92] W. B. Yeats, "Estrangement" (1909), Dramatis Personae, p. 108.

[93] W. B. Yeats, "The Subject-Matter of Drama", "Discoveries" (1906), Essays and Introductions, p. 284.

[94] Yeats, Autobiographies, p. 193.

# CHAPTER IV

## "THE BURDEN OF OISEEN"

### Paul Vincent Carroll and Sean O'Casey

> Boast not, nor mourn with drooping head
> Companions long accurst and dead,
> And hounds for centuries dust and air.
> *The Wanderings of Oisin*

The exuberant spirit of Irish myth is a continuing presence in Irish life and art. But the influence of the Christian religion is also pervasive in Irish culture, and the spirit of paganism is in direct conflict with the more repressive aspects of the established Church. The Oisin-Patrick Dialogues best reflect this conflict. These Dialogues are basic to a literary tradition which protests against the spiritual repression of organized Christianity and extols the freedom of the imagination: St. Patrick is almost always satirized as the villain, and Oisin appears as a wilful hero who defies damnation to rejoin his old comrades in hell. In 1899 Alfred Nutt detected the potential of these Dialogues for Irish art; they lacked only "an artist capable of conceiving all that the contrast of ascetic Christianity and Pagan joy of life implied, and of seeking until he found the one form of words adequate to the conception."[1]

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[1] Alfred Nutt, *Ossian and Ossianic Literature*, quoted from David Krause, "The Rageous Ossian," *Modern Drama*, 4, No. 3 (Winter, 1962), 279.

Standish O'Grady's shortened version of the Dialogues in History of Ireland I, "The Burden of Oiseen", judiciously omits a direct characterization of St. Patrick, but does convey the spirit of anti-clericalism and the feeling of loss which is basic to the originals:

> "O son of Calpurn of the crosses, hateful to me is the sound of thy bells and the howling of thy lean clerics. There is no joy in your strait cells; there are no women among you, no cheerful music.
>
> . . . . . . . . . . . . .
>
> "How stood the planets when power was given you, that we should grow pale before your advent. Withered trees are ye, blasted by the red wind. Your hair, the glory of manhood, is shaven away; your eyes are leaden with much study; your flesh wasted with fasting and self-torture; your countenances sad. I hear no gleeful laughter; I see no eyes bright and glad; and ever the dismal bells keep ringing, and sorrowful psalmody sounds.
>
> "Life is a burden to you, not a pleasure. It is the journey of one travelling through desolate places hastening homeward.
>
> "Not such, not such was our life, O cleric; not such the pleasures of Fionn and the Fiannia. The music that Fionn loved was that which filled the heart with joy and gave light to the countenance.[2]

As might be expected, Lady Gregory treats the Dialogues more humorously, and develops the characters of both Oisin and St. Patrick. The poet-hero of the Fianna is reduced to a querulous old man, and St. Patrick is his rigorous disciplinarian. Lady Gregory prefers a lively exchange of viewpoints to biting satire, and although she presents the virtues of the heroic life, she balances these with the more positive aspects of Christianity. Oisin's lament, however, is an uninterrupted lyrical farewell to the glories of the past:

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[2] Standish O'Grady, History of Ireland I (New York: Lemma Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 36-37.

> It is long the clouds are over me to-night! It is long last night was; although this day is long, yesterday was longer again to me; every day that comes is long to me!
>
> That is not the way I used to be, without fighting, without battles, without learning feats, without young girls, without music, without harps, without bruising bones, without generosity, without drinking at feasts, without courting, without hunting, the two trades I was used to; without going out to battle Ochone! the want of them is sorrowful to me.[3]

In his poetic adaptation of the Dialogues, Yeats portrays Oisin as a defiant, proud hero even in his extreme old age, and minimizes the tone of sorrowful lament and self-pity which is so obvious in Lady Gregory's version:

> Put the staff in my hands; for I go to the Fenians,
> O cleric, to chaunt
> The war-songs that roused them of old; they will rise,
> making clouds with their breath,
> Innumerable, singing, exultant; the clay underneath
> them shall pant,
> And demons be broken in pieces, and tramped beneath
> them in death.[4]

Yeats shifts his attention to the conflict of the heroic past with the commonplace present in his later plays. However, he recognizes that the pagan-Christian conflict is a pervasive characteristic of all of Synge's drama, with the possible exception of Deirdre of the Sorrows:

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[3] Lady Gregory, Gods and Fighting Men (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1970), p. 354.

[4] Yeats, "The Wanderings of Oisin", ll. 201-204, The Variorum Edition of the Poems, ed. Peter Allt & Russell Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 61.

> The strength that made him delight in setting the hard virtues by the soft, the bitter by the sweet, salt by mercury, the stone by the elixir, gave him a hunger for harsh facts, for ugly compromising things, for all that defies our hope. . . . Though like 'Oisin after the Fenians' he remembers his master and his friends, he cannot put from his mind coughing and old age and the sound of bells. . . . [His characters desire] an ardent life, like that of Oisin for his 'golden salmon of the sea, clean hawk of the air.'[5]

Many of Sean O'Casey's plays are also structured around the Oisin-Patrick theme. Both Synge and O'Casey create a vision of life which reflects the pagan world of the Fianna.[6] Paul Vincent Carroll, a dramatist similar in many respects to O'Casey, experiments with modern adaptations of the Oisin theme in two plays, The White Steed and The Old Foolishness.

Like Yeats, Carroll was immersed in Irish folklore from his earliest years, since he was born in County Louth close to Baile's Strand, an area famous for its mythic and folk associations. He was also strongly influenced by the Abbey Theatre in which he saw "the spiritual rebirth of the Irish race," and interpreted the Easter rebellion of 1916 as "the stern realization of these Abbey stage dreams, when Pearse seized the G.P.O. at the bayonet point and a hail of lead and the fluttering of the tricolor announced the Irish Republic."[7] From his observations of the continuing armed conflicts in Dublin, Carroll concluded, like Shaw, that the Irish are motivated more by imaginative idealism than by any species of rationalism. They continually indulge in dramatics because they "have been doomed to be the saviours of idealisms in the Nordic jungle."[8]

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[5] Yeats, "Preface to the First Edition of John M. Synge's Poems and Translations," Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 308.

[6] David Krause more fully develops this point in his article "The Rageous Ossian," Modern Drama, 4, No. 3 (Winter, 1962) 268-291.

Carroll was vehemently opposed to the powerful influence which the Church had on Irish society. A strong anti-clerical theme runs through many of his plays, although, like O'Casey he uses clerics as symbols for either positive or negative values, emphasizing the importance of tolerance and understanding, and questioning the authoritarian dictates of Christian doctrine.

In _Shadow and Substance_[9] Carroll dramatizes the tension between Christianity and paganism, although he does not specifically utilize Irish myth. The heroine, Brigid, embodies aspects of the Celtic pagan goddess and of the Christian saint to create a symbol of the essential nature of the Irish spirit, which is crushed between the conflicting forces of the rebel schoolmaster and the Swiftian Canon.[10] Michael MacLiammoir sees Shadow and Substance as yet another dramatic interpretation of a problem which has its roots "in the fundamentals of the Irish mind, in that strange war between Paganism and Christianity with its astonishingly frequent armistices and tactical parleys, the war that has obsessed a considerable portion of Irish thought since Oisin argued with Patrick."[11]

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[7] Paul Vincent Carroll, "The Substance of Paul Vincent Carroll," _New York Times_, 30 Jan. 38, Sect. 10, p. 1.

[8] _Ibid_.

[9] This play was produced in New York in 1938. Other plays by Carroll are _The Watched Pot_ and _Things that are Caesar's_, both produced at the Abbey in 1930 and 1932 respectively; _The Strings My Lord are False_, _Green Cars go East_, _Goodbye to the Summer_, all set in Scotland; and _Kindred_, _The Wise Have not Spoken_, _The Devil came from Dublin_ and _The Wayward Saint_, in which Carroll returns to Irish settings.

Carroll deplored the theatre of realism, but was equally scornful of "spurious spirituality and mysticism [which] have monstrously twisted [the] original conceptions of beauty in the abstract."[12] Only through symbol could the dramatist approach abstractions, and, like Yeats, Carroll saw in the myth and folklore of his own country an accessible source of beauty and of truth:

> To me the cultural wealth of a nation lies in its ancient folktales. They remain the fundamental plaster casts holding the feet of the nation in what Yeats has called the "earth's old timid grace." So that when I try to make a play that will not have merely substance but beauty also I go back invariably into the folk-tales, into the wisdom of old days, and having relearned something of simplicity I return to survey with much greater detachment the present maelstrom of egotism, persecution and cruelty.[13]

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[10] "The Substance of Paul Vincent Carroll," New York Times, 30 Jan. 38, Sect. 10, p. 1. Brigid could be readily compared with Carroll's characterization of Maeve in The Old Foolishness.

[11] Michael MacLiammoir, "Problem Plays," The Irish Theatre, ed. Lennox Robinson (London: Macmillan, 1939), p. 207.

[12] Paul Vincent Carroll, "Irish Eyes are Smiling," New York Times, 17 Apr. 38, Sect. 10, pp. 1-2.

[13] Paul Vincent Carroll, "On Irish Legend and the Arts," New York Times, 8 Jan. 39, Sect. 9, p. 3.

The old myths convey an exuberant love of life which contrasts effectively with the cynicism of the present. Carroll always found in the old Irish tales "great laughter and feasting, and the love of this battered imperfect thing called life."[14] It is this Ossianic spirit which constitutes one emotional and philosophical polarity of The White Steed, and against it are set the harsh castigations of a fanatical cleric, Father Shaughnessy.

Carroll takes as the mythical base of his play the story of Oisin's journey with Niamh to the Land of Youth, and his return to his homeland after a stay of three hundred years. He then "strains the old story through the meshes of the centuries, in which are caught so much grand foolishness, and with the help of symbolism [applies] it to the modern world in the terms of the life in [his] native land."[15] It is primarily through Nora Fintry that Carroll conveys this mythic vision. She is "a girl who lives by instinct, kept pure by a dreaming conception and a vivid sense of the indestructible beauty of the world."[16] For her the white steed is a symbol of truth and beauty, and the little black men in the ancient story symbolize the hordes of humanity in modern times, repressed and frightened. Nora incarnates the pagan spirit of youth, joy and freedom, which struggles against social and religious authority. She is keenly aware of her deep roots in Ireland's past:

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

> What I have in me that won't let me stoop I didn't get in England, for England hasn't got it to give. I got it here. It was in Aideen when she rode by Oscar's side at the Battle of Garva. It was in Cuchulainn when he tied himself to a pillar before he'd stoop to death, it was in Ossian when he rode back on Niam's white horse and found the land full of priests like you and little men like that poor schoolmaster there, and it's in me now, making me refuse to come to your council table and swallow the ancient draught of humility.[17]

For her such visions embody that enduring spirit of race which must not be allowed to perish:

> No man is my master. No damned generation of clerics will hunt me down. I am a daughter of what was here before you all and a mother of what will be here after you are all gone.
>
> (The White Steed, Act III, p. 132)

She refuses to compromise this vision, and unhesitatingly chooses a life of suffering and loneliness, rather than submit to the easy servitude of a more domestic life.[18] The man she marries must also be a free, heroic spirit.

She finds her Oisin in the transformed shape of the schoolmaster, Denis Dillon, when he freely mounts her white steed to join the battle against the little black man. It is only through Nora's strength and the subtle proddings of the Canon, however, that Dillon achieves such heroic stature, changing from a Firbolg to a Danaan giant:

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[17] Paul Vincent Carroll, The White Steed, Act II (New York: Random House, 1939), p. 75. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

[18] Cf. the nature of the heroic choice in Yeats's Cuchulain plays.

> It's wonderful. I feel as if there was the taste of blood in my mouth, the taste of the blood of my enemies, the taste of the blood of the scoundrels who have taught me to love their laws and hate life. I, that have warm blood and the laugh of a giant.
> (Act II, p. 87)

Such a miraculous transformation of a coward who "has come fearfully out of the centuries, dumb and hungry,"[19] whose only bravery has been induced by drink, is highly improbable, and Dillon's protests that he too has his dreams of a hidden Ireland, that in spirit, if not in substance, he is a poet-warrior like Oisin, do little to mitigate the impression that he is too weak and fearful to achieve heroic proportions.

Ranged against the pagan affirmation of life are the forces of tyranny and zealous piety led by Father Shaughnessy, who believes that humanity must be regulated by rules and strict discipline. He is much like O'Casey's Father Domineer in Cock-a-Doodle Dandy, violently protesting against any form of youthful pleasure or freedom, and enforcing his dictates with physical and mental cruelty. But his fanaticism only succeeds in instigating violence and in perpetuating prejudice, fear and ignorance.

The pagan-Christian conflict is resolved by the enlightened old priest, Canon Matt Lavell. He embodies the best of both worlds, and mitigates the extremism of each:

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[19] "On Irish Legend and the Arts," New York Times, 8 Jan. 39, Sect. 9, p. 3.

> Honest men, Toomey, can sometimes be damned nuisances. That's why the Greeks killed Socrates, and quite right too. Did you ever hear of the law of come and go, of the law of Nelson and his blind eye? When the English, who have the wisdom of all mediocre people, are menaced by Communism, they don't shoot them down, do they? They picture them in comic papers with beards and bombs and laugh them out of existence. We, who are more learned but less wise, should do likewise with our Holy Willies on the one hand like Hearty and his Viligance men, and our pagans on the other hand like Dillon and our little firebrand Nora.
>
> (Act III, p. 147)

Heroics are easy "when the blood runs hot", but Dillon must also handle the harsh repercussions of such heroics. The Canon does not entirely refute the dreams of Nora and Dillon; each must find his own way. He has more faith in human nature and the grace of God than in moral exactitudes, and guides his judgements by an instinctive understanding of humanity. Canon Lavell is obviously the vehicle for the play's theme: "besides being brave [we] must be humorous, and besides being just [we] must have humanity and equanimity."[20]

Carroll's dramatic use of the legend of Oisin and Niamh may be somewhat obvious and contrived, as Yeats concluded when the play was submitted for an Abbey production, but this does not preclude the essential correlation of theme and image in the play. Carroll also stressed the universal relevance of The White Steed. Despite its explicit Irish setting and imagery, his play should interpret "a phase not only of the changing Ireland but of the changing world about it."[21]

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[20] Paul Vincent Carroll, from an interview in the New York Sun, quoted by Paul A. Doyle, Paul Vincent Carroll (Lewisburg: Bucknell U. Press, 1971), p. 42.

Carroll's later, more fantastical plays compare very closely with those of Sean O'Casey. There is the same hatred of religious and social hyprocrisy, the same positive values of freedom, joy and love in both The Old Foolishness and Cock-a-Doodle Dandy. Moreover, O'Casey and Carroll have a similar attitude to Irish myth, mingling the worlds of fantasy and reality, and creating characters as images more than as consistently motivated human beings. Surprisingly, however, Carroll disliked O'Casey's later plays, and walked out of all that he saw produced in London, "finding them false, insincere, and unpalatable."[22] His own play, The Old Foolishness, has received the same criticism from others. Robert Hogan dismisses it as "a private embroidery of Carroll's remembrance of things past," and "a gloss upon, rather than a photograph of Ireland."[23]

The central conflict of the play, however, is one basic to Carroll's view of life in Ireland, the conflict between a pagan spirit of freedom and a clerical spirit of restraint. This conflict is expressed through the opposition of Dan Dorian, an irrepressible, garrulous scoundrel, and Canon McCann. Dan, who fancies himself as a latter-day Finn, has no sympathy with the honest Christian virtues of work and obedience. His inclinations lie towards what he calls "the oul' foolishness," the pleasures of wine, women and song, and he continually laments their demise since the days of the giant Finn, for which he blames the intimidating influence of the clergy and the narrow piety of the people. Western Ireland's respectable ways place a continual restriction on Dan's freedom:

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[21] Ibid.

[22] The Journal of Irish Literature, ed. Robert Hogan, 1, No. 1 (Jan. 1972), 79.

[23] Ibid., p. 5.

> Fastin', prayin' and bein' respectable, and the oul' foolishness buried in pagan ground. It must have been grand in the oul' days when ye lay back and said to your women, "Dance yous lovely divils, dance, or I'll chop your heads off."[24]
>
> (Act I, p. 34)

His greatest desire is to return to the days of heroic battles and great loves, to leave this world of little black men who think only of money, cows and common sense:

> Och curtains and beds and beef and bored women, and sensible men, that's what life's come down to nowadays. . . . Man, if only I'd been alive in them days, instead of in this time of workin' and cryin' and prayin'.
>
> (Act II, p. 51)

Dan's arch enemy is the local religious authority, Canon McCann, a small, stout, tempestuous cleric, who typically carries a stick, as does Father Domineer in Cock-a-Doodle Dandy. Like O'Casey, Carroll satirizes the bigotry, greed and hypocrisy of a clerical system which stands in direct contrast to the pagan spirit, and in fact denies the very existence of pagan myth:

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[24] Paul Vincent Carroll, The Old Foolishness, Act I (London: Samuel French, 1944), p. 34. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

> Tim. (teasingly) There y'are! The Canon himself said three or four times in the hall that there was no (imitates the Canon) no authenticity for believin' in Finn, and that as the Catholic Church makes no mention of him in her records - we may safely put him amongst the omens, dreams and suchlike fooleries forbidden by the First Commandment.
>
> . . . . . . . . . . . .
>
> Dan. Ach, I'll put it in me mouth and spit it out. (Fiercely) Sure, if there was no Finn, and no great heroes, what are we livin' on for? Can we live by the Canon, gathered up in his little tempers like a weasel in a burrow?
>
> (Act II, p. 58)

This conflict is pervasive in the play, but the main theme is centred around the heroine, Maeve McHugh. She is another manifestation of Cathleen ni Houlihan,[25] symbolizing the enigmatic soul of Ireland which poets, gunmen and peasants have all tried to realize in their own way. She is not simply an image of that spirit of freedom and joy which finds such uninhibited expression in O'Casey's Loreleen. Her character is only vaguely defined by the reactions of others to her. She has few correlations with her namesake, the tall warrior queen of Irish myth. Carroll's Maeve is hesitant and fearful, and is buffetted about by each of the brothers in turn as they seek her affections. Like the composite Cathleen ni Houlihan figure in Maurice Meldon's Aisling, she is always running away from the violence and intense convictions of her suitors. Only Dan understands that Maeve's elusiveness is an attempt to preserve her freedom. On the stage, however, the role of Maeve would be a difficult one to portray, since she is more a fluctuating symbol than a credible character. Her inconsistencies are difficult to assimilate, and her final transformation into a doting mother-figure is completely out of keeping with her symbolic function in the play. After she has rejected the idealistic adulation of Tim, and Peter's "good sense", it is incomprehensible that she should choose to go with Francis, the gunman, to an exile in England. This exile theme is particularly difficult to credit in The Old Foolishness, since Maeve has been closely identified with many different aspects of Irish life. There is a dissociation of character and symbol, and Maeve diminishes in both human and aesthetic credibility.

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[25] In his rather cursory treatment of the play, Paul Doyle denies this symbolic association of Maeve with Cathleen ni Houlihan.

Sean O'Casey is more successful in assimilating themes and symbols of Irish myth into his plays. He is also attracted to the conflict of pagan and Christian values, but he does not consistently commit himself to one side. In some plays the differences are clearly defined, but in others he projects a comprehensive vision which incorporates the best of both philosophies. His approach to Irish mythology differs markedly from that of Yeats. In his early plays in particular he is preoccupied with destroying false heroic ideals with the harsh light of reality. His women provide a pragmatic comment on the heroic aspirations of the men: human beings are more important than principles.

O'Casey consistently emphasizes the values of a full and free life, and insofar as the Ossianic material illustrates these values, it can function as a symbolic equivalent. Even in one of his earliest plays, The Shadow of a Gunman, he depicts the oppressor-oppressed relationship in mythological terms, drawing on Shelley's Prometheus Unbound to illustrate the mental condition of his characters, and to distinguish the forces of freedom from those of organized religion.[26]

Although he had little contact with the new Celtic theatre in Dublin, simply because he could not afford the price of a ticket to see the plays, O'Casey felt a general sympathy with Yeats and his aspirations for Irish art. Like Yeats he had little confidence in purely political or social solutions and saw in the creation of a new national literature a means for the spiritual unification of Ireland. Yeats, however, lacked the necessary involvement with common people; his world was too far distant to be understood by the masses:

> Who would be the first to make an army out of these active and diligent dry bones? Who the first to breathe into them a breath from the flame of endeavor and strife

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[26] Sean O'Casey, "The Shadow of a Gunman", Collected Plays I (London: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 96-97.

> and defiance? Whose lips would first be touched by a red coal from God's altar?
>
> No; [Yeats] would not kindle a flame in the eyes of the common people, though he had kindled one in the eyes of Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan; though in a strange, deep way he loved the common people more than Griffith, MacNeil or DeValera did, or ever could.[27]

Thus he could sympathize with Yeats and Lady Gregory in the strident controversy over Synge's Playboy of the Western World, even before he became associated with the Abbey. In his Autobiographies he presents a comic version of the antagonistic sides, the most vocal of Synge's detracters being those who, of course, had not seen the play:

> Some blasted little theatre or other has put on a play by a fellow named Singe or Sinje or something, a terrible play, helped by another boyo named Yeats or Bates or something, said to be a kind of a poet or something, of things no-one can understand, an' he was to blame for it all, assisted be some oul' one or another named Beggary or something, who was behind the scene eggin' them on in their foul infamity.[28]

Yeats is generously defended by a member of the Gaelic League, who sees him in mythological terms as the saviour of Ireland:

> Yeats is a flame in the sword of light, a radiant wing on the shoulder of Aengus, a flash from the spear of Lugh of the Long Hand, a banner of song in the midst of the people![29]

When he entered the portals of the Temple, O'Casey was at first suspicious of the Celtic Twilight group, whom he saw as a hypocritical coterie of aesthetes. But his admiration for Lady Gregory and Yeats remained constant, even when he became thoroughly disillusioned with "Dublin's Gods and Half-Gods", and not withstanding the vehement differences of opinion over The Silver Tassie, which reconfirmed his earlier opinions that Yeatsian aesthetics differed fundamentally from his own. During his associations with the Abbey O'Casey was firmly committed to the criteria of social relevance and accessibility; he was intent on using the events of his time as material for his plays, and considered Yeats's esoteric symbolic structures too far removed from everyday consciousness to ever be successful. The heroic world had long since dwindled into mediocrity, and an idealization of its myths was no longer viable:

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[27] O'Casey, "Drums Under the Window", Autobiographies I (London: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 547 & 549.

[28] O'Casey, "Drums Under the Window", Autobiographies I, p. 511.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 516.

> Signs and symbols! Seeking substance from shadows, shining or shrieking. The poet had played with his toys too long. Aristocratic toys, self-fashioned; a few coloured with a wild philosophy, all tinged with beauty, some even with a gracious grandeur; but he had played with them all too long. . . . Ancestry had long since lost its handfast hold of man's mind. Man was no longer bothering to claim big house or battlemented castle, but was claiming the whole world for his ancestry. . . .
>
> But the poet, when he wished, with a light spring could jump down from the battlements to the earth again.[30]

After reading The Golden Bough at a time when his contact with the church was weakening, O'Casey became less sceptical in his attitude. Following the nationalistic bent of his compatriots he interpreted Irish myth as an exemplification of Ireland's glorious past, a romantic, idealized past which had little relation to the present:

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[30] O'Casey, "Rose and Crown", Autobiographies II (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 283.

> Th' poor oul' Boyne, thought Johnny, stepping over a stiff figure that had a rugged little cross, made of hazel twigs, pressed close to a pair of blackened lips; the river that had on it the home of the Dagda, the earth-builder; the river hailed as a friend by Ptolemy; the river of a thousand kings; the river that in its frown of winter and its song of summer must have often flowed in fear, listening to the thundering gallop of the Grey of Macha and the Black Sainglain, once the battle-steeds of the terrible battle-goddess, Morrigu, the Battle-Crow; and the battle-creaking clang of Cuchullin's bronze-poled chariot tearing along its banks, shaking the whole valley as it shook when the waters of the magic well burst forth to chasten Boann, the beautiful daughter of Nechtan, for her contempt of it, bruising her madly, its foaming waves striking at her and chasing her quick to the sea; or the clang of shield on shield and the clash of steel against steel when the Fenians tossed their foes about in battle. No more are you, now, proud river than a poor fancy of your old form, reaching the low level of a charmless holy wather for th' protestants of Ulsther.[31]

He admired the heroic visions of Padraic Pearse and thought of him as a latter-day Cuchulain; but Pearse was "a dreamer pulled separate ways by two attractions, for one hand held on to St. Patrick's robe, and the other stretched out to grasp the Spear of Danger held out to him by the singing, laughing, battling boy, Cuchulain."[32] O'Casey found Pearse's presentation of The Cattle Raid of Cooley in pageant form by schoolboys well worth doing, even though it had to contend with adverse weather and with the apathy of the general public. Pearse did not seek personal glory, but the glory of Ireland:

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[31] O'Casey, "Pictures in the Hallway", Autobiographies I, p. 397.

[32] "Drums Under the Window", Autobiographies I, p. 549.

> . . . the scarlet or white cloak of Cuchulain was good enough for him, and in his soldier's cap, a jaunty sprig from the holy oak of Derry Columcille whispering in his ear the words of the saint himself: "If I die, it shall be from the excessive love I bear the Gael."33

O'Casey recognized Ireland's need for a saviour figure, and was susceptible himself to hero-worship. He participated regularly in the ritual commemorations of Wolfe Tone, and found the nationalistic parades and spectacles as stirring as any other Irishman did:

> So History, in gay-coloured pageants, followed this black-haired, big-mouthed man [Douglas Hyde] through the streets of Dublin; and from moving lorries, drawn by ribboned horses, Dubliners saw, in costume-clad figures, Cuchullain fighting Ferdiah at the Ford, two lifelong friends slicing up each other; St. Patrick, dear saint of our Isle, espiscopally majestic, calmly showing all the snakes in Ireland the nearest way to the sea; white-bearded Brian Boru, the brave, at prayer in his tent at Clontarf, with the beaten, bloody Brodar and his men lifting its flap, about to enter and turn him into a dream of Gerontius . . .
>
> So the drums rolled, the bugles blew, the banners waved as Ireland's history and Ireland's hope went along College Green, defiantly passing Trinity College with the head up and a battling swing of the shoulders; the rolling drums shaking the doors and rattling the windows of big banks. . .34

O'Casey saw in the Labour leader, Jim Larkin, a latter-day hero who would unite not just the Irish workers, but the workers of the world, and later came to regard Stalin in the same light. But in 1913 during the terrible period of the lockout, he saw the labour movement more in terms

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[33] Ibid., p. 623.

[34] Ibid., pp. 494 & 503-504.

of an Irish nationalism, which subsumed all the petty differences of religious or social factions:

> The delivery of Ireland is not in the Labour Manifesto, good and salutary as it may be, but in the strength, beauty, nobility and imagination of the Gaelic ideal. I am one of those who has entered into the labour of our fathers; one of those who declare - by the fame of our forefathers, by the murder of Red Hugh; by the anguished sighs of Geraldine; by the blood-dripping wounds of Wolfe Tone . . . that we will enter into our inheritance or we will fall one by one.35

After the bloody fracas of 1916, however, O'Casey found such a vision inadequate for the real needs of Ireland and he became disillusioned with the revolutionary republicans. The salvation of the Irish people lay in the more fundamental reality of social progress, not through a retreat into the glorious past and an attempt to resurrect its values:

> Where now are Cuchullan and his brothers of the Red Branch? Gone, too; gone into dust ages ago. Not altogether gone to dust; their heroism is told still, and their great names are listed in a lot of memories, though the clang of chariots galloping by has gone into the clang of the hammers in Belfast shipyards.36

He could see nothing more ludicrous and pathetic than the compulsory teaching of Irish heroic stories to malnourished children, that "Children, who [were] rickety on their legs, [were] to be told of Cuchulain's hero leap over walls as

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[35] O'Casey, reply to Euchan in The Irish Worker, 1913, quoted from Feathers from the Green Crow: 1905-25, ed. R. Hogan (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1962), p. 95.

[36] "Rose and Crown", Autobiographies II, p. 389.

high as Nelson's Pillar."[37] For O'Casey reality lay in Ireland's uneducated working class, and he found the major symbols of his life and art in the world of poverty and struggle. Any reference to myth must be firmly grounded in this reality and substantiated by experience. His attitude to the archetypal Irish symbol of Cathleen ni Houlihan reflects this anti-romantic disposition. She is not the sorrowful queen of Yeats's poem, "Red Hanrahan's Song about Ireland", who is "purer than a tall candle before the Holy Rood",[38] nor the mythical old woman of Yeats's play, who summons Ireland's young men to a heroic destiny, but a drunken woman of the streets, who dances in defiance of poverty and repression, recklessly asserting her spiritual freedom before she sinks down in a "huddled mass of torn clothes and mud."

> She loves Cathleen ni Houlihan, he thought, in her own reckless way. In a way, she is Cathleen ni Houlihan - a Cathleen with the flame out of her eyes turned downwards. The feet of this Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan, are quiet now, but none have bent low and low to kiss them.
>
> Her courage breaks like an old tree in a black wind, and dies.
>
> The pure tall candle that may have stood before the Holy Rood, was sadly huddled now, and melting down into the mire of the street, beneath the British lion and unicorn.39

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[37] "Irish in the Schools", Feathers from the Green Crow, p. 265.

[38] W. B. Yeats, The Variorum Edition of the Poems, ed. P. Allt & R. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 208.

[39] "Drums Under the Window" Autobiographies I, p. 473.

This fierce and pathetic version of Cathleen ni Houlihan reappears in O'Casey's one act tragi-comedy, "Nannie's Night Out," as Irish Nannie. Despite her addiction to alcohol and her social degradation, Irish Nannie incarnates the Irish heroic spirit. It is in her assertive independence, in her dance of defiance, and in her brave repudiation of the false bravado of the gunmen that the heroic past lives on. Her final actions ironically dramatize the song of the Ballad Singer:

> For Ireland is Ireland thro' joy and thro' tears.
> Hope never dies thro' they long weary years.
> Each age has seen countless, brave hearts pass away,
> But their spirit still lives on in they men of today.[40]

In his "Political Phantasy", "Kathleen Listens In", O'Casey treats Cathleen ni Houlihan allegorically, but still refrains from any idealization. The romantic adulations of Kathleen's suitors are satirized, as are the modern preoccupations of Kathleen herself. She is more concerned with the latest trends in fashion and dance than with traditional values:

> Kathleen. Oh, for God's sake go away, an' done be annoyin' me. I have to practice me Fox Trots and Jazzin' so as to be ladylike when I make me deboo into the League o' Nations.[41]

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[40] O'Casey, "Nannie's Night Out", Feathers from the Green Crow, p. 305. For a fuller discussion of O'Casey's Cathleen ni Houlihan see William A. Armstrong, "Sean O'Casey, W. B. Yeats and the Dance of Life," Sean O'Casey: Modern Judgements, ed. R. Ayling (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 134.

[41] O'Casey, "Kathleen Listens In", Feathers from the Green Crow, p. 282.

For O'Casey, Cathleen ni Houlihan could also be capable of ignorance and cruelty, and his attachment to her lessened as he experienced the worst aspects of Irish nationalism:

> For the first time in his life, Sean felt a surge of hatred for Cathleen ni Houlihan sweeping over him. He saw now that the one who had the walk of a queen could be a bitch at times. She galled the hearts of her children who dared to be above the ordinary, and she often slew her best ones. She had hounded Parnell to death; she had yelled and torn at Yeats, at Synge, and now she was doing the same to him. What an old snarly gob she could be at times; an ignorant one too.[42]

He saw this cruel old woman in the aged figure of Maud Gonne, her heroic beauty withered into querulous old age:

> Sean saw, not her who was beautiful, and had the walk of a queen, but the poor old woman, whose voice was querulous, from whom came many words that were bitter and but few kind. . . . This was she for whom Yeats had woven so many beautiful cloths of embroidered poetry. She, too, was changed, changed utterly, for no ring of glory now surrounded that wrinkled, querulous face.[43]

Although he always insisted on a fundamental social and human basis for his plays and fiercely lampooned the Irish predilection for idealization and false heroics, O'Casey appreciated the value of dramatic symbol. In his early plays he utilized a peripheral symbolism, but as he developed his dramatic technique in the direction of expressionism and fantasy, he used symbol and myth in a more integral way. By 1937 he had come to regard theatre as the art of suggestion through symbol. There could never be total realism on the stage, nor should the dramatist strive to achieve the effect of realism. The closer drama moves to actual life, the further it moves away from the drama: "Drama purely imitative of life isn't drama at all."[44] It portrays life at its meanest and commonest, "as if life never had time for a dance, a laugh or a song." O'Casey "always thought that life had a lot of time for these things, for each was a part of life itself."[45]

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[42] "Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well", Autobiographies II, p. 150.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 152.

Through fantasy, myth and image O'Casey could express a vision of a world in which the conflicting forces of freedom and repression find imaginative equivalents and thus are more universally valid than any portrayal of a specific social situation. In this way O'Casey endeavoured to achieve a more positive approach to the complexities of life. In his later plays, *Red Roses for Me*, *Purple Dust*, *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy*, *The Bishop's Bonfire*, and *The Drums of Father Ned*, he attempted to portray an alternative to a narrow bigot~~t~~ed world through the symbolic projection of a Golden World of freedom, joy and song, Oisin's pagan world before the repressive influence of Christianity:

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[44] O'Casey, "Green Goddess of Realism", *The Flying Wasp* (London: Benjamin Blom, 1937), p. 124.

[45] Sean O'Casey, *New York Times*, 16 Nov. 58, quoted from Robert Hogan, *The Experiments of Sean O'Casey* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960), p. 174.

> Ah, them were th' golden days with an arm round a waist,
> When everything shone so shy an' gay;
> When a man had heart to toss the girls as well as time
> to toss th' hay -
> Oh, them were th' days when life had something fine to
> say![46]

O'Casey's positive vision for future progress is a "synthesis of ideals drawn from modern socialism, the New Testament, and ancient Gaelic literature."[47] Irish myth is only a partial evaluative touchstone for contemporary society, but in several of the plays it assumes a central symbolic function. O'Casey's positive ideal is most successfully rendered through such central symbols, which may take the form of imaginative characters, or of prophetic visions. The Bishop's Bonfire is perhaps less successful because it lacks a sufficient objective correlative for the "Golden Days". The only positive impetus of the play comes from snatches of Codger's song, or from the Christian liberalism of Father Boheroe. Sterility and desolation prevail over any attempts at joyous self-assertion. Codger Sleehaun, who endeavours to inject a spirit of fruition into the wasteland, fails to mitigate the repressive religious and social influence on the lives of the young, and only succeeds in preserving his own free spirit by moving on down the road:

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[46] O'Casey, The Bishop's Bonfire (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 29.

[47] Ronald Ayling, Introduction to Sean O'Casey: Modern Judgements, p. 31.

> An' they tell me there's a stature of Ireland's hero, Cuchullain, somewhere up in Dublin. Oh, Keelin, Keelin me darling, I'm Irish an' ashamed of it.[48]

The blighting powers of the Church are fully manifested in the death of Foorawn and the flight of Manus. The only light in The Bishop's Bonfire is provided by the bonfire itself, a negative image of purgatorial fires and hell, the combined repressive forces of society and church. The play can be seen in terms of the Oisin-Patrick conflict, but its prevalent pessimism precludes any dramatic tension which may arise from such a conflict. This tension is more successfully realized in an earlier play, Red Roses for Me.

In Red Roses for Me O'Casey combines the comedy and satire of his earlier plays with the expressionistic fantasy of his later works. Acts II and IV are monopolized by ideological and political debate, and are less emotionally convincing than is Act III which projects a prophetic vision of social harmony. In this particular play O'Casey is more successful in expressing ideas through image than through debate, and it is this symbolic quality which determines the play's pervasive imaginative direction. Characters and events gradually assume an imaginative reality which takes them beyond the limitations of political and social circumstance, and even the most "realistic" of scenes are potentially symbolic. The backdrop for Act I, for example, which is a duplicate version of O'Casey's own tenement dwelling, complete in detail to the horse-hair sofa and the three carefully-tended flowers, has an imagistic function: the colour of the flowers contrasted with the drabness of the room, establishes the dichotomy of the noble ideal and the lowest denominators of existence which runs through the play.

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[48] The Bishop's Bonfire, p. 85.

The hero, Ayamonn Breydon, is a freely-drawn self-portrait: his interests reflect those of the young O'Casey, although he derives his name from the playwright's Gaelic friend, an old tram conductor. But more significantly, Ayamonn is a symbolic figure, an Oisin warrior-poet, a dreamer yet a man of action. He has an omnivorous appetite for the arts and attempts to write poetry himself:

> Mrs. Breydon. I'd thry to rest a little, Ayamonn, before you go to work. You're overdoing it. Less than two hours' sleep today, and a long night's work before you. Sketchin', readin', makin' songs an' learnin' Shakespeare: if you had a piano, you'd be thryin' to learn music. Why don't you stick at one thing, an' leave the others alone?
>
> Ayamonn. They are all lovely, and my life needs them all.[49]

O'Casey is careful not to project a passive poet-dreamer, however, and emphasizes Ayamonn's bravery and impulsive loyalty to his friends. He is a latter day Oisin who grows convincingly out of a real environment. Moreover, he exemplifies O'Casey's ideal of tolerance; his friends include those from many divergent political and religious affiliations, and he respects them more for what they are as persons than for the philosophies they expound. Each man must search for freedom in his own way:

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[49] O'Casey, "Red Roses for Me", Act I, Collected Plays III (London: Macmillan, 1951), p. 132. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition of the play.

> If we give no room to men of our time to question many things, all things, ay, life itself, then freedom's but a paper flower, a star of tinsel, a dead lass with gay ribbons at her breast an' a gold comb in her hair. Let us bring freedom here, not with sounding brass an' tinkling cymbal, but with silver trumpets blowing, with a song all men can sing, with a palm branch in our hand, rather than with a whip at our belt, and a headsman's axe on our shoulders.
>
> (Act II, p. 169)

O'Casey reinforces Ayamonn's potential stature as a mythic national leader by linking him with the image of Cathleen ni Houlihan, who first appears in the play as his mother, the old woman dressed in the robe of a queen. Ayamonn is cognizant of Cathleen's two faces, the pathetic impoverished actuality, and the beautiful ideal, and he prefers to follow the ideal, believing that man needs a vision of beauty to show him the way out of the morass of his existence:

> Roory, Roory, your Kaithleen ni Houlihan has th' bent back of an oul' woman as well as th' walk of a queen. We love th' ideal Kaithleen ni Houlihan, not because she is false, but because she is beautiful; we hate th' real Kaithleen ni Houlihan, not because she is true, but because she is ugly.
>
> (Act III, p. 197)

Ayamonn's search for beauty in life, however, does not blind him to the present mundane needs of his friends and countrymen. Idealistic dreams and heroic memories must both be put into the service of the present:

> Ayamonn. Forget him, an' remember ourselves, and think of what we can do to pull down th' banner from dusty bygones, an' fix it up in th' needs an' desires of today.
>
> (Act III, pp. 197-198)

The visionary climax or epiphany of the play in Act III dramatizes this union of the heroic spirit with socialistic concerns in Ayamonn. It constitutes an internal drama, a projection of his state of mind before he goes to his death. It "plumbs the mind of Ayamonn and attempts to re-inforce the play's theme vertically in depth rather than horizontally through progressive action."[50] The corresponding scene in "Pictures in the Hallway" is an illustration of Johnny's change of attitude to his life, and his resolution to be strong in the face of adversity, to profit by life and learning. In the play O'Casey strengthens the symbolic potential of the original description of Dublin as a city of poverty, penance and pain. Dominating the drab expanse of houses are the twin symbols of repression by Church and State, a tapering silver spire and Nelson's Pillar: "The sun shines on pillar and church spire, but there is no sign of sun where [the] people are." (Act III, p. 185)

O'Casey uses the men and women who inhabit this world of the streets as a chorus which comments on the bitterness and hopelessness of an impoverished existence. Three of the women, Eada, Dympna, and Finoola, have appeared previously in the play, also as a choral group. They are differentiated only by their ages, which represent the three stages of life, youth, middle age and old age. Otherwise they are uniform in their repressed appearance: "All their faces are stiff and mask-like, holding tight an expression of dumb resignation; and are traversed with seams of poverty and a hard life." (Act I, p. 136) They are dressed in the faded colours of a forgotten grandeur, and first appear carrying the faded statue of the Virgin. Like the city with which she is associated, the Virgin undergoes a startling transformation, and in both cases the chorus of women provide a link between the sordid reality of the present and the ideal beauty which is inherent in the rich tapestry of Ireland's legendary history. Near the beginning of Act III the trivial present and the heroic past are ironically juxtaposed through the dialogue of individuals in the chorus. The popular diversions of racing and drinking are placed in a context of history and tradition:

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[50] Robert Hogan, The Experiments of Sean O'Casey, p. 12.

> 2nd Man. Copper Goose'll leave him standin', if I'm e'er a true prophet.
>
> Eada (waking up slightly). Prophets? Do me ears deceive me, or am I afther hearin' somebody say prophets?
>
> Dympna. You heard a murmer of it, Eada, an' it's a bad word to hear, remindin' us of our low estate at the present juncture. Th' prophets we once had are well hidden behind God be now, an' no wondher, for we put small pass on them, an' God in His generous anger's showin' us what it is to be saddled with Johnnies-come-marchin'-home, all song an' shirt an' no surety.
>
> (Act III, p. 187)

At this point the women would prefer to forget the heroes of the past, who only serve to emphasize the changeless condition of the poor, but the reference to prophets ironically foreshadows Ayamonn's appearance in the role of saviour-hero. The only tangible sign of Ireland's heroic past is the picture of Brian Boru's golden harp on every black porter bottle;[51] the rich history of Dublin, the heritage of Grattan and Swift, has dwindled to the whine of beggar women. All three women do have their memories of past colour and glory, but only Finoola retains an imaginative contact with the deep-rooted myths of the country and not the more superficial identification with pageantry and colour:

> Eada (mournfully). We've dhrifted down to where there's nothin'. Younger I was when every quiet-clad evenin' carried a jaunty jewel in her bosom. Tormented with joy I was then as to whether I'd parade th' thronged sthreets on th' arm of a 16th Lancer, his black-breasted crimson coat a sight to see, an' a black plume droopin' from his haughty helmet; or lay claim to a red-breasted Prince o' Wales Own, th' red plume in his hat a flame over his head.
>
> Dympna. It was a 15th King's Own Hussar for me, Eada, with his rich blue coat an' its fairyland o'yellow braid, two yellow sthripes down his trousers, an' a red bag an' plume dancin' on his busby.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Finoola. What would a girl, born in a wild Cork valley, among the mountains, brought up to sing the songs of her fathers, what would she choose but the patched coat, shaky shoes, an' white hungry face of th' Irish rebel? But their shabbiness was threaded with th' colours from the garments of Finn MacCool of the golden hair, Goll MacMorna of th' big blows, Caoilte of th' flyin' feet, an' Oscar of th' invincible spear.
>
> (Act III, pp. 191-92)

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[51] Cf. the Cyclops episode in James Joyce's Ulysses where this mock-heroic technique is exploited more fully.

The final transition between present and past, between the actual and the ideal is facilitated by the song of Brennan o' the Moor. His themes of love and beauty are rejected by the chorus, but considered worthy of a kind reception by the newly arrived Ayamonn. The latter can respond to any attempt to instil colour into drab lives, and his generous open nature is contrasted effectively with that of his companion, Roory, a republican extremist, who has time only for the pure patriotic songs of Ireland. Roory's long oratorical enumeration of all such worthy subjects and songs is effectively deflated by the mundane response of Eada:

> Away you, too, with your spangled memories of battle-mad warriors buried too deep for words to find them.
>
> (Act III, p. 195)

Roory's heroic posturing does not awaken sympathetic chords in these people; they are reluctant to leave their somnolent state of ignorance and apathy to follow the easy slogans of radicals. His narrowness of vision leads to extremism and bigotry, and his complete ignorance of the more universal values expressed through the arts results in an erroneous conception of the way in which art should serve the state. In this he resembles the "patriot" in Synge's little play on National drama, who cannot conceive of any Irish art which is not morally pure and propagandist in intent.

Ayamonn's vision is at the same time more pragmatic and more idealistic. To achieve any social improvement, each individual must participate in the immediate struggle for freedom; each man must break his own mind-forged manacles:

> [Dublin is] what our hands have made her. We pray too much and work too little. Meanness, spite, and common pattherns are woven thick through all her glory; but her glory's there for open eyes to see.
> (Act III, p. 196)

Dublin's latent glory is manifested by the reflection of the setting sun, and Ayamonn sees the beauty of the city in terms of a concurrence of the heroic past with the present actuality. He assumes the role of divine seer to inflame the imaginations of the people around him and they, too, see themselves as part of the visionary city. The women change from hags into beautiful queens, and Finoola briefly assumes the identity of the ideal Cathleen ni Houlihan, dancing with Ayamonn in a joyous assertion of spiritual freedom.[52] Dublin becomes like a song of Oisin, but it is also a city of God, a New Jerusalem which unites the pagan and Christian values of past and present in one subsuming vision: "Sons and daughters of princes are we all, an' one with th' race of Milesius!"(Act III, p. 201) God is made manifest through youth, beauty, and love. But Ayamonn cannot sustain this dream of freedom and harmony. So that it may be realized in actuality he must return to the world of action, suffering and death, and he bestows a farewell blessing on the girl who has briefly embodied this ideal image of Cathleen ni

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[52] See W. A. Armstrong, "Sean O'Casey, W. B. Yeats and the Dance of Life", Sean O'Casey: Modern Judgements, p. 137.

Houlihan:

> You're lovely stayin' still, an' brimmin' over with a wilder beauty when you're dancin; but I must go. May you marry well, an' rear up children fair as Emer was, an' fine as Oscar's son.
>
> (Act III, p. 202)

With the return to normality, the people assume that they have been dreaming, but a residue of heroic defiance remains in their resolve to support the strike action. By juxtaposing the sound of singing with the ominous sound of marching feet, O'Casey effectively summarizes the terms of the struggle for freedom against the powerful forces of repression.

Ayamonn's decision to return to the fight is a form of heroic choice, and O'Casey emphasizes the values which are at stake in Act IV. Like Yeats's Cuchulain, he must choose between suffering and an early death, and the love and security of the domestic existence offered by his mother and by his sweetheart, Sheila:

Mrs. Breydon. Stay here, my son, where safety is a green tree with a kindly growth.

Men and Women (in chorus - above). He comes with us!

Sheila. Stay here where time goes by in sandals soft, where days fall gently as petals from a flower, where dark hair, growing grey, is never noticed.

Men and Women (above). He comes with us!

Ayamonn (turning towards them). I go with you!
(Act IV, p. 211)

In Red Roses for Me the world of domestic peace offered by the women is repudiated for a more heroic vision; O'Casey diverges from the pragmatic attitude of his earlier plays with this assertion of the necessity of absolute ideals. However, Sheila Mooreen functions less as a viable alternative to the heroic way of life than as a symbol of narrow and restrictive Christianity. She is a female derivative of St. Patrick, attempting to bind the soul of Oisin. She places her religion before love, and because she is repressed by the authorities of Church and State, she is incapable of that freedom of spirit which love demands. While Ayamonn thinks of love in terms of Angus, the pagan god of youth, beauty and joy, Sheila's orientation is towards more materialistic social values. It is not until Ayamonn's death that she can appreciate his ideals, and then she realizes that she is incapable of sharing them:

> He said that roses red were never meant for me; before I left him last, that's what he said. Dear loneliness tonight must help me think it out, for that's just what he said.
>
> (Act IV, p. 226)

O'Casey's attitude to religion in his plays is never entirely negative, and he counterbalances the cold chastity of Sheila's catholicism and the blatant bigotry of the Protestant radicals with his portrayal of the Rector of St. Burnupus.[53] Significantly the Rector wears a green scarf, an indication that for O'Casey he is an Irish nationalist in the truest sense, since he serves the religious needs of the people with tolerance and understanding. He recognizes the emotional value of symbols in uniting mankind, and refuses to allow the removal of the cross of daffodils that Ayamonn has placed in the church. For the Rector that cross signifies new life and the resurrection of Christ. But the flowers in the form of a Celtic cross also have strong associations with a more pagan past. This symbol unites the life forces of Christianity and of pagan myth [54] which are destroyed by hatred and ignorance.

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[53] The Rector is a freely drawn portrait of O'Casey's friend, Edward Morgan Griffin. See "Pictures in the Hallway", Autobiographies I, p. 389.

O'Casey's central images function on various levels. The Sword of Light, for example, the lightning sword of Lugh, the sun god, has several meanings in the play. As a symbol of enlightenment and liberation it is identified with the hopes of Roory and Ayamonn for the final salvation of the Irish people:

> . . . th' light of freedom; th' tall white candle tipped with its golden spear of flame. The light we thought we'd lost, but it burns again, strengthenin' into a sword of light.
>
> (Act I, p. 158)

The sword of light has wider associations for O'Casey, as it does for Ayamonn, however. In the Autobiographies its religious and nationalistic significance is made quite clear:

> The Sword of Light! An Claidheamh Solis; the Christian Faith; the sword of the spirit; the freedom

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[54] The Celtic Cross has a similar symbolic function in The Drums of Father Ned.

> of Ireland; the good of the common people; the flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life - which was it? where would he find it?
>
> He went back into the darkened room, sat down, leaned his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. He glanced at the little smoky lamp and fancied that it had changed to a candle - a tall, white, holy candle, its flame taking the shape of a sword; and, in its flaming point, the lovely face of Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan.[55]

The sword has a negative significance in the play as well. It is first brandished by Ayamonn when he acts out Richard III, and here its function is destructive and bloody. It reappears in the hands of the soldiers who cut down the strikers at the end of the play:

> Inspector. Remember, all! When swords are drawn and horses charge, the kindly Law, so fat with hesitation, swoons away, and sees not, hears not, cares not what may happen.
>
> (Act IV, p. 212)

When Ayamonn takes up the Sword of Light, he also takes up the sword of suffering and death.

Ayamonn's comprehensive vision of life assimilates the paradoxes of pleasure and pain, of noble ideals and base actions. Each rose must have its thorn; the pursuit of freedom, joy and beauty necessarily involves suffering:

> I tell you life is not one thing, but many things, a wide branching flame, grand and good to see and feel, dazzling to the eye of no-one loving it. I am not one to carry fear about with me as a priest carries the Host. Let the timid tiptoe through the way where the paler blossoms grow; my feet shall be where the redder roses grow, though they bear long thorns, sharp and piercing, thick among them!
>
> (Act I, p. 143)

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[55] "Pictures in the Hallway", Autobiographies I, p. 360. The Sword of Light was also the name of a journal published by the Gaelic League and edited by Patrick Pearse.

That Ayamonn finally wins his red roses through death is suggested by the words of Brennan's final song, and it is Cathleen ni Houlihan who presents him with the bouquet:

> A sober black shawl hides her body entirely,
> Touch'd be th' sun an' th' salt spray of th' sea;
> But down in th' darkness a slim hand so lovely,
> Carries a rich bunch of red roses for me!
> (Act IV, p. 228)[56]

At first Ayamonn thinks of Sheila as an incarnation of the rose, associating the conventional values of youth, beauty and love with his sweetheart. But she proves unworthy of its fullest significance and of Ayamonn's vision. His mistress can only be Cathleen ni Houlihan.

Purple Dust is more obviously a piece of theatrical entertainment than is Red Roses for Me, and its social didacticism is diffused by the broadly comic situations and characters. O'Casey renders his positive vision for Ireland and for the world through symbolic farce. The characters are further removed from actual social issues than they are in Red Roses for Me, and they are less clearly individualized. In this respect, O'Casey's play differs markedly from Shaw's treatment of a similar situation in John Bull's Other Island. Although both playwrights attack the spurious image which the English have of the Irish, O'Casey also attempts to project a positive image, whereas Shaw prefers the ironic detachment afforded by satire. John Bull's Other Island did not meet with the approval of the Abbey Theatre in 1904, although it was written at the request of Yeats for "a patriotic contribution to the repertory of the Irish Literary Theatre". Shaw had no patience with what he considered to be the idealization of Irish life in the Abbey Theatre, and wrote his play with the intention of destroying these false illusions.

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[56] This song appears in O'Casey's Autobiographies, where it is sung by Johnny following a dramatic performance in one of Boucicault's plays in the Old Mechanics, Abbey Street. At this point it has no symbolic significance. Johnny expresses his disappointment after he has overheard a critical discussion of his acting ability. ("Pictures in the Hallway", p. 309)

> One of the reasons, says Bernard Shaw, why the Abbey didn't do my play was because it wasn't congenial to the whole spirit of the neo-Keltic Movement, bent on making a new Ireland out of its own ideal, while my play was an uncompromising presentment of the real old Ireland.[57]

O'Casey acknowledges the influence of John Bull's Other Island on his own play, and it is evident from his summary of Shaw's theme that he concurs with its socialistic bent, even though he does not consider the imagination as an entirely negative characteristic in the Irish makeup:

> Near naked, Ireland stood, with the one jewel of Keegan's Dream occasionally seen sparkling in her tousled hair, attaching poverty to pride; a shameful figure, but noble still, though her story was hidden and her songs unsung. . . .
>
> Two elements fought each other, back to back: a dream without efficiency, and efficiency without a dream; but with this tense difference: that from the dream efficiency could grow, but from the efficiency no dream could ever come.[58]

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[57] O'Casey, "Drums Under the Window", Autobiographies I, p. 561.

[58] Ibid., p. 559.

Through the character of Doyle, Shaw projects his criticism of the overly imaginative Irishman, who is incapable of action because caught in a dream of the ideal:

> Oh the dreaming, the dreaming! the torturing heartscolding, never satisfying dreaming, dreaming. . . . An Irishman's imagination never lets him alone, never convinces him, never satisfies him; but it makes him that he can't face reality nor deal with it nor handle it nor conquer it.59

Ironically enough, it is an Englishman, Broadbent, who is the avid student of Irish myth,[60] and his zeal is undermined by the more pragmatic local priest, Father Dempsey:

> Broadbent (Referring to the guide book). Murray says that a huge stone, probably of Druidic origin, is still pointed out as the die cast by Finn in his celebrated match with the devil.
>
> Cornelius [Doyle's father and a local farmer]. Deuce a word I ever heard of it.
>
> Father Dempsey (very seriously indeed, and even a little severely). Don't believe any such nonsense, sir. There never was any such thing. When people talk to you about Finn McCool and the like, take no notice of them. It's all idle stories and superstition.
> (John Bull's Other Island, Act II, p. 419)

O'Casey establishes a similar clerical antipathy to pagan myth in Purple Dust. The priest is again representative of the negative, repressive forces of organized religion, and as such opposes the spirit of freedom and joy which O'Casey

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[59] G. B. Shaw, "John Bull's Other Island", Act I, from The Complete Plays (London: Oldhams Press, 1934), p. 411.

[60] Cf. James Joyce, Ulysses, in which the Englishman, Haynes, is in a similar situation.

imaginatively associates with the pagan past.

However, the main object of satire in Purple Dust is pretension. O'Casey considers the Big Houses of Ireland symbolic of all the pretentiousness and hyprocrisy inherent in a false idealization of the past. "Civilization goes far deeper down than either grace, or charm, or big house."[61] What remains of beauty on the outside only serves to mask the internal corruption and decay:

> Everything old is sacred in every country. Give a house a history, weave a legend round it, let some titled tomfool live or die in it - and some fool mind will see loveliness in rottenness and ruin.[62]

The things of the past are valuable only insofar as they are beneficial to the present. O'Casey suggests in the title of the play that tradition can be either a negative or a positive force: the past may be no more to the present than a handful of purple dust, a remnant of the faded finery which cloaked brittle ostentation. But purple dust can also be the vestiges of previous ideals and glories which should enrich the present, even though they are nearly forgotten. The old Irish myths are now regarded as no more than a "little cloud o' purple dust blown before the wind," (Purple Dust, Act II, p. 71) but still can be an inspiring and ennobling influence on Irish life and art. O'Casey states the theme of his play in an essay entitled "Purple Dust in their Eyes":

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[61] "Rose and Crown", Autobiographies II, p. 390.

[62] O'Casey, "Purple Dust", Act I, in Collected Plays III, pp. 10 & 11. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition of the play.

> What is in my mind is the revolution brought about by Time and the slow-moving or swift-moving winds of change. The play, written in 1937-38, saw the disappearance of what was called the Empire. . . . The winds of change come, and no one feels them till they become strong enough to sweep things away, carrying men and women (however comic and enjoyable), bearing off their old customs, manners and morals with them.[63]

Closely associated with this attack on the moribund past is O'Casey's satirical treatment of philosophies which extol the virtues of a life close to Nature. Such idealistic fantasies deny the very real hardships of country life, and abnegate the technological advances of modern civilization. Man will find neither innocence nor a greater spirituality in the primitive life of the past.

Implicit in O'Casey's attack on the false pastoral is a criticism of the idealistic natural philosophy of George Russell, who saw in Irish country life a model for living. As O'Casey is quick to point out, Russell's point of view was coloured by his comfortable vantage point, and he had no conception of the material and intellectual privation of the peasants:

> Could any reflection be sillier, more hysterical or more hypocritical than this? Back to nature in a gorgeous car! Back to a lofty, roomy house, shaped like a Greek temple, with pillars holding up the facade, made of wood, and painted white. . . . Go back to God, go back to nature, without telling us how to do it. This

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[63] O'Casey, "Purple Dust in their Eyes", Under a Colored Cap (1963), The Sean O'Casey Reader, ed. Brooks Atkinson (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 983.

> is not the cry of the shepherd, but that of an hireling, afraid to face what God has brought to pass in the changes of a changing world. . . . The ways behind man were closed; the way before him was open, and forward he must go.[64]

Basil Stoke and Cyril Poges epitomize this unrealistic emphasis on pastoral and traditional values. Their complete ignorance of the past they are trying to resurrect is obvious whenever they embark on a pretentious eulogy of tradition or culture. Poges in particular prides himself on his knowledge of Irish mythology; however, whatever fragments of information he does possess are either erroneous or grossly distorted. He simply parrots common attitudes and ideas without any understanding of their significance:

> Oh, these priests, these priests! Thick as weeds in this poor country. Opposed to every decent thought that happens not to have come from them. Ever on guard to keep the people from growing out of infancy. No one should give them the slightest encouragement. Oh, if the misguided people would only go back to the veneration of the old Celtic gods, what a stir we'd have there! To the delightful, if legendary loveliness of - er - er - er - what's his name, what's her name, what's their name? I have so often said it, so often in my mind, the chief, or one of the chief gods of the ancient Celts?
>
> . . . . .
>
> Brogdingnag! That was the fellow - the fellow that ate the nine nuts - or was it seven? plucked from the tree hanging over the well near the world's end.
>
> (Act I, pp. 40-41)

Despite his affected castigation of the clergy, Poges is for the sake of convenience aligned with the local Canon in his social views, and, since both men are basically materialistic, there is no real cause for friction in more minor matters such as religion or morality. The Canon also extols the "virtuous" life of the past, which he contrasts with the decadent present, and in particular condemns the youthful pleasures of dancing, singing and courting. The Canon is of course diametrically opposed to O'Killigain, whom he considers a snake in the garden of their community. O'Killigain's attitude and conduct are a threat to the absolute control of the Church, because they exemplify a love of freedom and pleasure.

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[64] O'Casey, "Inishfallen Fare Thee Well," Autobiographies II, p. 184.

O'Killigain is ostensibly the hero of Purple Dust, although his dramatic presence is not sufficiently weighted to carry the entire positive impetus of the play. He is another of O'Casey's Oisin figures, good humoured, handsome, loving life in its entirety, and actively pursuing beauty and pleasure. Typically he enters the play with a song on his lips, extolling the richness of life:

> They may rail at this life, from the hour I began it,
> I found it a life full of kindness and bliss;
> And until they can show me some happier planet,
> More social and bright, I'll content me with this.
> (Act I, p. 10)

For O'Killigain love must be ardently pursued, because it is the essential life force which overcomes evil and death. The real world is found in love, in emotional and physical love as much as in spiritual love. O'Killigain fixes his eye on the present; although he can appreciate the genuine vision of O'Dempsey, he is contemptuous of the false ideals such a romantic attitude can easily perpetuate. The value of myth lies in its relation to the present, not to the past. Thus O'Killigain is capable of using Irish legendary material ironically, even sarcastically, to deflate the pretentiousness of others. He mockingly describes the Tudor House as "fit for the shelther an' ayse an' comfort of Nuad of the Silver Hand, were he with us now, or of the great Fergus himself of the bright bronze chariots" (Act I, pp. 12-13), and amplifies his flattery of the women with references to heroic beauty: "Finely woven as a plover's wing, it is. No way odd it ud look as a cloak for the lovely Emer; an', if it hung from th' sturdy shouldhers of Queen Maev herself, she'd find a second glory!" (Act I, p. 18). O'Killigain shares Ayamonn Breydon's social concerns, but he is less of a dreamer. O'Casey chooses to emphasize his basic social orientation by referring to his participation in the Spanish Civil War, a detail which may be extraneous to the action of the play, but it is an important aspect of O'Casey's conception of his hero.[65]

O'Dempsey, who is closer to the mythic world, functions as a thematic support for O'Killigain. In fact, O'Casey intended that these two characters be complementary:

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[65] David Krause particularly objects to such "irrelevant" details. See Sean O'Casey: The Man and his Work (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1967), p. 186.

> It is true that while O'Killigain is a realist, O'Dempsey is a romanticist, but as the play shows, O'Killigain can understand, and further, the romanticism of his friend, and O'Dempsey can understand, and aid, the realism of O'Killigain.66

O'Dempsey's function as a dreamer and visionary is implied in O'Killigain's description of him as "a wandherin' King holdin' th' ages be th' hand" (Act I, p. 18), and he is physically characterized as a Celtic hero type, "th' powerful man with th' powerful beard" (Act II, p. 61). The other workmen regard him as different from themselves, he is a mysterious man who possesses the gift of lyrical speech and imaginative story-telling. He can see into the future as well as the past, and warns of the inevitable destruction of the house by the floods. Historical time has no meaning for O'Dempsey; whatever lives in his imagination has an actuality in the world around him. Ireland's mythic heroes constitute a living presence; they are not the dead repositories of heroic ideals, but an inherent part of the lives of the peasants, and of the Irish countryside:

> I heard sthrange things be day, an' see sthrange things be night when I'm touched be the feel of the torch of the long-handed Lugh. When the Dagda makes a gong o' the moon, an' th' Sword o' Light shows the way to all who see it.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Then every rib o' grass grows into a burnished fighter that throws a spear, or waves a sword, an' flings a shield before him. Then Ireland crinkles into a camp, an'

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[66] "Purple Dust in their Eyes", p. 985.

> kings an' sages, queens an' heroes, saints an' harpers stare me in the face, an' bow, an' pass, an' cry out blessing an' vict'ry too, for Heber's children, with the branch of greatness waving in their hands![67]

O'Dempsey's vision does not end with the mythological cycles, however; his view of Ireland's history is as imaginatively coloured as is his view of myth. He regards the revolutionary heroes as part of a continuing pageant which reaches up to the present and into the future. Ireland still has a need for such hero-redeemers to reinvigorate the Irish spirit and purge it of its decadent materialism and religious fear:

> Barrin' O'Killigain there an' a few, what is there now but a bitther noise of cadgin' mercy from heaven, an' a sour handlin' o' life for a cushion'd seat in corner? There is no shout in it; no sound of a slap of a spear in a body; no song; no sturdy winecup in a sturdy hand; no liftin' of a mighty arm to push back the tumblin' waters from a ship just sthrikin' a storm. Them that fight now fight in a daze o' thradin'; for buyin' an' sellin', for whores an' holiness, for th' image o' God on a golden coin; while th' men o' peace are little men now, writin' dead words with their tiny pens, seekin' a tidy an' tendher way to the end. Respectable lodgers with life they are, behind solid doors with knockers on them, an' curtained glass to keep the stars from starin'!
>
> (Act II, pp. 71-72)

As did Oisin, O'Dempsey sees the country overrun by little black men, who pass their lives in fear and blind obedience to Church and State. Yet he is fiercely proud of Ireland and quick to defend her rich traditions and advanced civilization when goaded by Poges:

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[67] Purple Dust II, p. 69. O'Casey felt such Irish allusions were entirely comprehensible to any intelligent audience. "A number of the figures in the play are mentioned by Yeats in his poems; by Synge in his play about the Sons of Usna; by Lady Gregory in her Gods and Fighting Men." ("Purple Dust in Their Eyes", pp. 988-89).

> Hammerin' out handsome golden ornaments for flowin' cloak an' tidy tunic we were, while you were busy gatherin' dhried grass, an' dyin' it blue, to hide the consternation of your middle parts; decoratin' eminent books with glowin' colours an' audacious beauty we were, as O'Killigain himself will tell you, when you were still a hundhred score o' years away from even hearin' of the alphabet.
> (Act I, p. 35)

His vision is intensely nationalistic, focussing on the day when Ireland will be completely free of English political and cultural domination, and he harbours a savage hatred for all things traditionally British. He appeals to Souhain to forsake her decadent English ways and return to the country of earthly and spiritual beauty:

> Come, then, an' abide with the men o' th' wide wathers, who can go off in a tiny curragh o' thought to the New Island with th' outgoin' tide, an' come back be th' same tide sweepin' in again!. . . With firm-fed men an' comely, cordial women there'll be laughter round a red fire when the mists are risin', when th' roads an' fields are frosty, an' when th' nights is still. . . .
> (Act III, p. 105)

O'Dempsey is an unconvincing lover, despite his lyrical blandishments. Nor is he particularly successful as one of the comic workmen. In casting him simply as "2nd workman" O'Casey perhaps indicates that he is uncertain as to O'Dempsey's primary function in the play. He is both a Celtic king and an irrascible workman; the imaginative world of Irish myth is grounded in an anti-heroic world of human foibles and vices.

Whereas Stokes and Poges are mercilessly castigated for their idiocies, the two girls, Avril and Souhain, are spared such scathing treatment, primarily because, for O'Casey, they embody the virtues of youth and beauty and, therefore, can be forgiven almost anything. He refrains from any moral judgement of their behaviour, and their social hypocrisy is regarded solely as the product of unfortunate associations. They are finally redeemed through an appeal to their basic need for freedom and love, and they flee the scene of destruction with their attendant lovers to begin a new life. The world to which they escape, however, remains conveniently vague: it is an earthly Tir na nOg, suitably reached via a white steed or a curragh. In effect, O'Casey is replacing the false ideal world of Stoke and Poges with an equally illusory ideal. Whereas Synge's liberated heroes and heroines simply escape down a road which promises no idyllic solutions to life, the lovers of Purple Dust depart for another version of the pastoral life, presumably free from hardship and suffering. They move from oppression to freedom, from death to life, to a world of everlasting youth:

> Come from the dyin' an' fly from th' dead,
> Far away O!
> An' now, with th' quick, make your home an' your bed,
> With a will an' a way, away O!
> (Act III, p. 119)

In Purple Dust O'Casey creates a closed world of fantasy: its values are imaginatively convincing, but they do not sufficiently relate to the harsher facts of life.[68]

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[68] In Cock-a-Doodle Dandy the forces of pagan vitality and religious repression are again opposed, but this time O'Casey uses images from English and German mythology to project his positive vision.

In The Drums of Father Ned, O'Casey attempts a more comprehensive expression of his positive vision of life. There is an increased awareness of the undermining influence of time and change on the ideals of the young, and a recognition of the complexities of individuals and of society. Ignorance, fear and hatred are manifestations of human weakness, not simply the result of abusive political or religious systems. As an antidote to this weakness, O'Casey creates a central harmonizing symbol in the play which incorporates the divergent forces for good latent in individuals and in the country. This human symbol, Father Ned, is an ideal union of the pagan spirit with Christianity. O'Casey indicates by his dedication of the play to the more liberal clerics of Ireland that his intention is not to attack the Church as a repressive force, but to satirize human weakness and vice wherever it is found. Although it was refused by the Dublin International Theatre Festival in 1958 because of pressure exerted by the Archbishop, The Drums of Father Ned remains the most optimistic and entertaining of O'Casey's plays. O'Casey clearly indicates his positive attitude in the prologue:

> This comedy's but an idle, laughing play
> About the things encumbering Ireland's way;
> A flag shoved from a window, and a cry
> To wake up drowsy girl and drowsier boy,
> To snatch from Erin's back the sable shawl,
> And clothe her as she was before her fall;
> In cloak of green as bright as spring's young call;
> Beside her Tara's harp from off a time-stain'd wall,

To play new dandy airs; holding high the poet's hazel rod,
String tied to tip, hook-holding a crimson berry,
With myrtle and with laurel wove, deep-dipp'd in wine,
Champagne or sherry;
That mobled minds may all new courage grow,
And miser'd hearts be merry.[69]

Although the play was not written specifically for the Theatre Festival associated with the Tostal celebrations, it is centred around a similar Tostal festival in an Irish country town. Due primarily to the enlightened spirit of Father Ned, however, this particular festival is neither parochial nor retrospective. It is both a cultural celebration and an international representation of the arts, an attempt to broaden the interests and attitudes of the local citizens. The Tostal is essentially a pagan festival, however, celebrating the season of rebirth and renewal. This basic function is still acknowledged by the youth of the town in their placing of flowers at the windows of every house, although their intentions go further than a simple acknowledgement of the coming of Spring. They see in this particular festival a chance to radically change the life of the community, to replace sterility and death with growth and life:

Bernadette. Old fields can still bring forth new corn, says Father Ned, my Tom; an' wintry minds give place to thinking born of spring. Doonavale'll know, says he, something about the liveliness of colour; an' Doonavale'll hear music - great music, a little, good music, a lot says he; an' near the end the setting sun, with music at the close, says he, that sometimes fills the heart with the burden of beauty.
(The Drums of Father Ned, Act II, p. 49)

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[69] O'Casey, The Drums of Father Ned (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960). All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition of the play.

The optimistic views of the young are asserted on the Tostal posters: "We were dead and are alive again." One of these posters significantly hangs half over the portrait of the Pope.

This rebirth theme corresponds with the basic comic pattern of the play, a pattern which developed from primitive religious celebrations of the return of Spring. These rites usually involved the marriage and subsequent fruition of a god.[70] In The Drums of Father Ned, Father Ned is the god who will bring in a fruitful life to replace the sterility of the past.

The Tostal traditionally incorporates in its rituals a celebration of the heroes of the past. In this case the young people are performing a pageant in honour of Wolf Tone and his abortive insurrection. Such Irish heroes belong to the present, and their influence continues to ennoble the actions of future generations. The heroic figures which appear on the Tostal shields are also indicative of the spirit which the young people are trying to resurrect from earlier more vibrant times: Conn of the Hundred Battles, Brian Boru, Columcille and Angus.

Angus, the Irish god of love and beauty, gradually assumes a central symbolic role in the play, for he embodies that freedom of spirit which the youth are striving to achieve.

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[70] Robert Hogan develops this idea fully in The Experiments of Sean O'Casey, p. 139.

He represents more than youthful sexuality, although the fact that O'Casey chooses to associate him with the gaily-coloured cock indicates that this is a part of his significance. More important, he is a god of poetry and music, and as such represents cultural values. The church organist humorously links him with Mozart and Bach as one of "dee great ones chosen by God to give moosic an' joy to His people" (Act I, p. 46), while Father Fillifogue, the bigot~~t~~ed Parish Priest, has never heard of Angus.

Such heroic symbols should not encourage the dreaming backward-looking tendencies of the Irish; they are a positive expression of an assertive and joyful attitude to life. However, they are not sufficient values in themselves. The individual must eventually come to terms with the realities of age and death, and recognize that physical love, youth and beauty, are only ephemeral qualities. To achieve complete fulfillment, the lovers, Nora and Michael, must be flexible in their ideals and in their attitudes to life.

> Michael. My God, an' we're tangled too, in life's great glittering braid! To know the stars only through the song of a poet; then to forget the poet and the song he sang! All the stars of heaven are close to me when you are near. Angus the Young is by our side; we hear his harp-music, an' his brilliant birds are perching on our shoulders.
>
> Nora. For a brief while, my Michael. The purple tent of love must fade, and its passion becomes a whisper from a night that's gone. May our love pass quietly into companionship, for that is the one consummation of united life.

Michael. Yes, the Bard and his harp, with his birds, must go one day, leaving us to live in our own light, and make our own music. So we shall; then take a kiss for what it's worth, and let the dream go by.
(Act III, pp. 82-83)

This recognition of the transitory nature of romantic love is echoed by the other pair of lovers in the play, Bernadette and Tom. An awareness of the inevitability of age and death can make young love much more precious, but youth should look beyond itself and become aware of the potential richness of every phase of life:

Bernadette. Every flower in its fullest of colour an' scent; every leaf as fresh an' green, veined without spot or blemish, as the sun an' itself can make it - Oh, Tom, what a garden we might have!

Tom. The ageing rose must fade an' th' tiring leaf must fall. As we, one day, sweet Bernadette, must fade an' fall, too.

Bernadette. Yes, yes, when all that could be done is done; not be a wild grab at life, but a sturdy, steady livin' of it; when all our deeds an' joys'll be as many as the leaves on an ash or th' blossoms on a three of hawthorn. Then we can fade in quietness, and fall with the carelessness of satisfaction.
(Act II, pp. 50-51)

Nora and Michael are for O'Casey types of modern liberated youth, free of social hypocrisy and religious bigotry. They are actively fighting "what is old and stale and vicious: the hate, the meanness their [fathers'] policies preach: and to make a way for th' young and thrusting." (Act III, pp. 81-82) When they decide to run against their fathers for seats in the Dail they carry the spirit of the Tostal into the world of social and political conflict.

Aggressive action is the only valid alternative to exile for Ireland's youth, and it is ultimately for this purpose, social change through a reinvigoration of the spirit of the young, that Father Ned is working.

Although Father Ned is the most pervasive character in the play, he never actually appears as a specific individual. Rather, he is a symbolic presence, guiding the thoughts and deeds of his followers like a Parish Priest. But his religious affiliations are never specified; he incorporates the traditional authority of Catholicism and the critical impetus of Protestantism.[71] He mocks the ecclesiastical and social privileges of the Church by hoisting the Tostal flag over the Presbytery, and by painting the door red. His militant attitudes are emphasized by the continuous beat of the drums, which beckon the youth to join the fight against repression and hypocrisy. Although he looks towards the future, he also stresses the values of the past, and recognizes the needs of the present:

Man of the Musket. . . . Go ahead, says Father Ned, an' think. (Jauntily) Thractor runnin' round oul Castle ruins, says he.

Man of the Pike. Go ahead, an' say things, he said. (Jauntily) The pylon, says he, as well as th' Round Tower.

Man of the Musket. Go ahead, says Father Ned, an' do things.
(Act III, p. 96)

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[71] G. Wilson Knight, "Ever a Fighter: The Drums of Father Ned," Sean O'Casey: Modern Judgements, p. 180.

Father Ned is a spirit of social progress, but he is also obliquely associated with the mythical forces of life. In fact, he resembles a pagan deity himself, loved by some, misunderstood and feared by others. As described by Skerighan he appears as a disembodied prophetic spirit:

> Not that way, man, for there wasna claithin' on a body that wasna there, but fierce green eyes shinin' lak umeralds on fire in a white face that was careerin' aboot though stayin' stull as an evenin' star, starin' up tae me frum doon in th' valley below. . . . Aw'y, on' a wild flop of ruddy hair, flamin' lak a burnin' bush; one long white hand pointin' up, th' ither one pointin' down, forbye th' sound of a clear voice sayin' naethin' an' meanin' all, all surrounded by a michty clerical collar round a neck I couldna see; all th' time, th' green eyes starin' doon at me frae th' top o' th' hill, an' up at me frae th' valley below that werena there.
>
> (Act II, p. 64)

Father Ned is associated with every positive value in the play - love, beauty, youth, cultural enlightenment, religious freedom and progressive political action.

Diametrically opposed to Father Ned is the figure of Father Fillifogue, an exaggerated comical version of St. Patrick battling the pagan forces of Oisin. He is too much of a buffoon to constitute a threat to the spirit of the Tostal, however, and can only defend himself against Father Ned by putting up his umbrella. The young people ignore him or flagrantly disobey his dictates, and he is completely vanquished at the end of the play by the forces of freedom. O'Casey seems to imply that the authority of the Church no longer goes undisputed in modern Ireland.

A more vicious and ingrown threat to progress and freedom lies in the continuing internecine strife - of one religion against another, one political affiliation against another. The Prerumble to the play establishes the bitterness and the destructive powers of such civil feuding, and also emphasizes its ludicrous insanity. Although the Black and Tans have actually burned the town, the mutual hatred of McGilligan and Binnington constitutes an equally destructive force. Whatever values remain after the oppressors have left, such Irishmen will destroy: they "will do more harm to Ireland living than they'll ever do to Ireland dead." (p. 10) The Prerumble shows how the older generation has nearly destroyed the Golden Age.[72] The Round Tower and the spire of the Church are the sole remnants of heroic or Christian values. The Keltic Cross, which symbolizes the ideal union of pagan and religious spiritual freedom and rebirth, still stands "dazzling in its whiteness", "but a little crookedly, its symbol silent now, and near forgotten." (p. 1)[73] This destructive hatred is the force against which the next generation must fight. Even though it has been somewhat tempered by materialistic inclinations, it is none the less a powerful inhibitory force in a country presumably at peace.

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[72] Robert Hogan, "In Sean O'Casey's Golden Days", Sean O'Casey: Modern Judgements, p. 162.

[73] Cf. the cross of daffodils in Red Roses for Me.

Ironically, Binnington and McGilligan are flagrantly ostentatious in their religious and patriotic duties, glossing an inner corruption with an outward show:

Binnington (frenziedly). We've our own cultures woman! We've our own dances, our own music, our own games, our own language, an' our own way of propoundin' out a preparation for the life to come. We want nothin'; an we're all proud of what we have.

Mrs. Binnington. I'm sure you are, though I never knew you to play an Irish game; I never seen you in an Irish dance; an all you know of Irish is a greetin', an even when you use one, you've to hurry in its sayin' for fear you'd lose it. That robe an' cocked hat of yours weren't fosthered from any concept creepin' outa Tara Hill.

(Act I, pp. 19-20)

But as in Purple Dust, the winds of time and change blow no good for such bigotted and narrow attitudes:

Bernadette. The night is whisperin' that their day is endin'.

McGunty. It's their climmax! (Lilting and playing) Th' chimes of time is playin' them out. La la la la; la la la la.

(Act II, p. 76)

By the end of the play the spirit of the Tostal has completely taken over. Even the forces of the North are moved to join those of the South in the march towards freedom.

However, this final beatific vision of wholeness, harmony and radiance is perhaps a little too facile to be emotionally convincing. The negative forces in the play are established merely as puppets to be knocked down by the unquestionable ideologies of the young. The characters exist primarily as vehicles for O'Casey's social and moral philosophies. But in its dramatic use of symbol and fantasy The Drums of Father Ned is imaginatively alive and fully conveys O'Casey's fundamental love of life in all its dimensions. In the conclusion of his autobiographical sequence, he joyously asserts this heroic spirit:

> What would he drink to - the past, the present, the future? To all of them! He would drink to the life that embraced the three of them! Here, with whitened hair, desires failing, strength ebbing out of him with the sun gone down, and with only the serenity and the calm warning of the evening star left to him, he drank to Life, to all it had been, to what it was, to what it would be. Hurrah![74]

In his attempts to come to terms with past, present and future, O'Casey utilizes the symbols of Irish nationalism which have been culled from the old myths by his predecessors. His approach to these symbols, however, varies with the needs of each play; he is rarely guilty of a facile equation of the ideal with the mythic. Any easy idealism is particularly accessible to satire, as O'Casey fully appreciates in such plays as The Plough and the Stars. His interests lie more with an exploration of human character in its complex relations with such environmental forces as country and religion.[75] Irish myth functions as a means to establish a positive value, or as a weapon to deflate a false ideal.

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[74] O'Casey, "Sunset and Evening Star", Autobiographies II, p. 665.

[75] For a discussion of O'Casey's "higher nationalism" see David Krause, "Sean O'Casey and the Higher Nationalism: the Destruction of Ireland's Household Gods", Theatre and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Ireland, ed. Robert O'Driscoll (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 115.

# CHAPTER V

# VACILLATION

## Denis Johnston and Maurice Meldon

Between extremities
Man runs his course.

Before Irish myth had become familiar material, most of its early interpreters approached it with circumspection. The plays written at the beginning of the Irish Renaissance were idealistic and nationalistic in tone. Yeats and Synge adopted a more subjective attitude to the old legends, finding in them a source for intensely personal symbols. By using myth Yeats attempted to dispel the Green Goddess Realism and to expand the range of the theatre beyond its narrow social preoccupation. The most recent plays, however, reflect the current dissatisfaction with high aesthetic and nationalistic ideals. Irish myth has become a target for satire.

This complete reversal in approach to myth in Irish drama illustrates what Northrop Frye considers to be the essential development of myth in relation to literature. According to Frye, the literary treatment of myth develops through three stages:

> First there is undisplaced myth, generally concerned with gods or demons, and which takes the form of two contrasting worlds of total metaphorical identification, one desirable and the other undesirable. These worlds are often identified with the existential heavens and hells of the religions contemporary with such literature. These two forms of metaphorical organization we call the apocalyptic and the demonic respectively.1

The earliest Irish myths tell of this conflict between the forces of light and darkness, between the Tuatha de Danaans and the Fomorians and Firbolgs. The second general tendency Frye terms "romantic, the tendency to suggest implicit mythical patterns in a world more closely associated with human experience."[2] Such an expression of myth is reflected in the stories of the Fianna and of the Red Branch; because they project basic patterns of human experience, these stories had the most significant impact on Irish literature. Finally myth gravitates towards "realism", the tendency "to throw the emphasis on content and representation rather than on the shape of the story."[3] This approach is best found in the works of O'Casey and Carroll, who exploit myth for the purposes of allusion and symbol in plays which are concerned with contemporary social problems.

The movement within myth is essentially cyclic, the basic pattern being that of death and rebirth, a pattern of identical recurrence. Frye defines the literary genres

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[1] Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 139.

[2] *Ibid*., pp. 139-140.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 140.

according to their varying projections of this circular pattern, and according to their proximity to the two inherent directions of myth, the cyclic movement within the order of nature, and the dialectical movement from that order into the apocalyptic:

> The top half of the natural cycle is the world of romance and the analogy of innocence; the lower half is the world of "realism" and the analogy of experience. There are thus four main types of mythical movement: within romance, within experience, down, and up. The downward movement is the tragic movement, the wheel of fortune falling from innocence toward harmartia to catastrophe. The upward movement is the comic movement, from threatening complications to a happy ending and a general assumption of post-dated innocence in which everyone lives happily ever after.[4]

From its most primitive literal forms, myth tends to move through romance to tragedy to comedy to satire. Romance, according to Frye, is the nearest of all literary forms to wish-fulfillment or dream. It is a quest for the ideal by a semi-divine hero who must first overcome demonic opposition. The earliest interpreters of Irish myth tend to see it in this form, especially Standish O'Grady and Samuel Ferguson, whose works are intentionally idealistic. Most of the earliest "Celtic" drama is romantic in conception with an emphasis on clearly defined moral distinctions.

From romance the circular movement is downwards towards tragedy. In the tragic apprehension of experience the characters are caught between a dream of the ideal and the restrictions of the natural order. The hero incarnates both the divine and the human, and in the process of pursuing the ideal is inevitably defeated by his own human deficiencies. Yeats's plays articulate this basic tragic pattern by emphasizing the inherent tragedy of the Cuchulain and Deirdre stories. In the evolution of the "Celtic" Theatre in Ireland, his plays best realize the fundamental mythos of Irish legends.

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[4] *Ibid.*, p. 162.

The pattern of O'Casey's later fantasy plays is basically comic, closely approximating the mythos of Spring. The action frequently involves a rebirth motif, a revival of the old gods of love and joy. There is also a movement from restrictive law to liberty within the social context:

> . . . the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another. At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters are in charge of the play's society, and the audience recognizes that they are usurpers. At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallize around the hero.[5]

O'Casey's comedy is often ironic or satiric; its point of reference is the world of experience or reality. Satire is a parody of romance, "the application of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content which fits them in unexpected ways."[6] In satire the protagonists are often parodies of idealized heroes: in Johnston's play, The Old Lady Says "No!", for example, the Speaker is an abject reincarnation of Robert Emmet, and in Meldon's play, Aisling,

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[5] Frye, p. 163.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 223.

Cathleen ni Houlihan appears as a trivial and selfish young woman. Both Denis Johnston and Maurice Meldon overtly exploit this discrepancy between the ideal and the actual by using explicit symbols and themes from Irish myth. The pattern has come full circle: whereas earlier dramatists used the heroic figures of Irish legends as moral exempla, the most recent playwrights show the inadequacies of such ideals in the complex modern world.

The dramatic evolution of Denis Johnston is exactly opposite to that of Sean O'Casey. His earliest plays are expressionistic and fantastical, but he moves away from such radically experimental work towards a more conservative realism. It has been suggested that Johnston's early plays influenced the development of O'Casey's more expressionistic techniques, but certainly any influence was reciprocal; Johnston's play The Scythe and the Sunset, was written in response to the moral questions raised by The Plough and the Stars. Johnston's continuous experimentation with form and subject makes it virtually impossible to trace any consistent point of view or stylistic development in his plays. He never fully commits himself to one form of expression, and as a result gives the impression of a certain dilettantism: "he does things well, but not for long enough"[7] to achieve a depth or intensity of meaning. From the expressionism and fantasy of The Old Lady Says "No!" and A Bride for the Unicorn, he moves to a more topical subject and realistic style in *The Scythe and the Sunset*, *A Fourth for Bridge* and *The Moon in the Yellow River*. *The Dreaming Dust* tackles the same elusive subject explored by Yeats in *The Words Upon the Window-Pane*, the relationship of Swift and Vanessa, but Johnston chooses the allegorical format of a morality play to reveal the personalities of his eighteenth century protagonists. *Strange Occurrence on Ireland's Eye* is a relatively conventional detective drama, and *Storm Song* is an autobiographical dramatization of the adventures of a film crew on the Aran Islands. It is rather surprising, then, to discover that as late as 1941, when he had already abandoned the more radical techniques of expressionism, Johnston was insisting on the necessity of experimentation in drama: "If the Irish Theatre is to get out of the blind alley in which it finds itself today it must be prepared to make a brave leap in the dark."[8] Because of the excessive pursuit of realism the fundamentals of the theatre have been forgotten:

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[7] Hilton Edwards, "Denis Johnston," The Bell, ed. Peadar O'Donnell, 13, No. 1 (Oct., 1946), 9.

> The theatre should be theatrical. It should be a practical expression of the experiences and emotions of the people. It should be thoroughly democratic and should frankly accept the axiom that the onlooker is as important to the play as the Actor.[sic][9]

According to Johnston, the Abbey catered solely to public popularity, and any vestiges of Yeats's more aesthetic criteria had long since disappeared. If it had any standard of drama "it [was] the extremely sensible one of running what happens to bring the public in for as many months as it [would] go, and taking off the rest as soon as possible."[10]

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[8] Denis Johnston, "A National Morality Play", *The Bell*, ed. Sean O'Faolain, 1. No. 6 (March, 1941), p. 89.

[9] *Ibid*.

Since the rejection of his first play, The Old Lady Says "No!", by the Abbey, and its subsequent production by Michael MacLiammoir and Hilton Edwards in the Peacock Theatre in 1929, Johnston has been associated with the Gate Theatre in Dublin. However, he always stressed that the title of this particular play was never intended as an oblique reference to Lady Gregory's reaction to its submission to the Abbey for production. In fact, in later years he came to agree with her criticism of the play, that apart from the opening, it was rather common, and he is considerably more vituperative himself in dissecting his first dramatic effort:

> Viewing the fine production recently put on at the Gaiety, one can see what Lady Gregory meant, and one can also realize what a symbol of its age and generation "The Old Lady" is. It has all the noise, the indignation, the incoherence, the violence, the cynical sincerity of the Roaring Twenties. There is no technique about it at all. It is a spontaneous reaction following an age of romantic values and rancid political clichés, and it was bound to have been written by somebody. But what a pity it was not written by a Poet instead of by a Half-Coherent who, whenever he finds himself staggered by the gigantic issues he has raised, has nothing better to do than to fall back upon Dante and the Holy Writ! It is true that these issues

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[10] Johnston, "The Theatre", The Bell, 2, No. 4 (July, 1941), p. 81.

> are fundamentally religious ones, but what they cry out for is to be restated in the language of great verse, rather than in that of a revivalist meeting.[11]

Johnston attributed the initial and later success of his play to the acting skills of MacLiammoir, and the production skills of Edwards. The founders of the Gate Theatre, however, had a much higher opinion of the play: MacLiammoir considered it "altogether remarkable and precisely the sort of Irish play they had been looking for,"[12] although it was perhaps "barred from an ultimate victory anywhere [else] by the too intimate localism."[13] Edwards judged the play the finest Irish work of the period, marred a little by obscurity, but this was the hallmark of the twenties, when dramatists credited their audiences with "the kind of intelligence that a few among them claimed."[14]

In a Preface to The Old Lady Says "No"!, Johnston clearly states his intentions: he is satirizing the false heroics which are embedded in Ireland's national character, and which bear no relationship to the squalid events of everyday life. To undercut this tendency towards blind patriotism and hero-worship, Johnston juxtaposes myth and reality. He sees in the story of Emmet's abortive rebellion of 1893 all the heroic ingredients of great national myth; primarily, "it was very high-minded, and completely unsuccessful".[15] It was picturesquely costumed, and insufficiently organized: ". . . the whole episode has got that delightful quality of story-book unreality that creates a glow of satisfaction without any particular reference to the facts of life."[16] To strengthen the pseudo-mythic properties of the Emmet legend, Johnston initially casts his hero and Sarah Curran in the roles of Naoise and Deirdre. This device of a play within a play serves to further distance the heroic world and its attendant false values from the present. Johnston heightens the artificiality of the heroic convention by either parodying, or directly incorporating the well-known patriotic or mythic poems of such nineteenth century romantic poets as Mangan, Moore, Ferguson, Kickham and Todhunter. Assuming the persona of Deirdre, Sarah histrionically cries out, "I shall not weep. I shall not breathe his name. For my heart in his grave will be lying. I shall sing a lament for the Sons of Usnach." (Part I, p. 23)

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[11] Johnston, "Drama: The Dublin Theatre", The Bell, 3, No. 5 (Feb., 1942), 359.

[12] MacLiammoir, "Yeats, Lady Gregory, Denis Johnston," The Bell, 6, No. 1 (Apr., 1943), 38.

[13] MacLiammoir, Theatre in Ireland (Dublin: Sign of the Three Candles, 1950), p. 29.

[14] "Denis Johnston", The Bell, 13, No. 1 (Oct., 1946), 11.

In playing the role of Emmet, the Speaker consciously creates the role of a great mythic hero who is aware of his glorious destiny. Through his bombastic assertions Johnston ridicules the grandiose attitudes of the Irish towards their heroes:

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[15] Denis Johnston, Preface to "The Old Lady Says "No!", Collected Plays I (London: Jonathan Cape, 1960), p. 16. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition of the play.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

> I have written my name in letters of fire across the pages of history. I have unfurled the green flag in the streets and cried aloud from the high places to all the people of the Five Kingdoms: 'Men of Eire, awake to be blest! Rise, Arch of the Ocean and Queen of the West!' I have dared all for Ireland and I will dare all again for Sarah Curran. Ah, it is a glorious thing to dare!
> (Part I, p. 23)

When the Speaker is catapulted from the imaginative world of the theatre into the reality of the present, now directly assuming the persona of Emmet, he finds his heroic stance in sharp contrast with the facts. Johnston achieves a violent juxtaposition of past and present, and the values of both worlds become suspect.

It is through the prophetic statue of Grattan that he instils a sense of balance in this confusion of time and place. For Johnston, Grattan apparently represents one of Ireland's unacknowledged but genuine heroes: his sense of political justice and humanitarianism was too inglorious to be hallowed by the national memory, but he represents, none the less, the voice of reason in the irrational flow of history. His function is to deflate the pretentiousness of the Speaker:

Speaker. I am Robert Emmet. I have written my name in letters of fire across the page of history. I have unfurled the green flag. . .

Grattan. Letters of fire?

Speaker. Their graves are red but their souls. . .

> Grattan. Ah yes, the graves are red . . . the graves of one poor helpless old man, the justest judge in Ireland . . . dragged from his coach by the mob and slaughtered in the road.
>
> (Part I, p. 34)

The stereotyped role which the Speaker enacts within the world of the play is repeated throughout the centuries by countless would-be heroes, whose only weapons are terror and death:

> Grattan: Oh it is an easy thing to draw a sword and raise a barricade. It saves working, it saves waiting. It saves everything but blood! And blood is the cheapest thing the good God has made. . . . Fool, fool, strutting upon the stage! Go out, into the cold night air, before you crucify yourself in the blind folly of your eternal playacting.
>
> (Part I, p. 35)

Grattan is a continuing presence in the play, never allowing the Speaker to forget the role he is assuming, refering to him as a Don Quixote and a Galahad. But Grattan himself has the voice of Major Sirr, and thus cannot be accepted as an entirely impartial observer. The Speaker counsels Grattan to look to his own soul.

Moreover, the satiric bite of the play is not consistently against the heroic assertions of the Speaker, and he does win a certain amount of sympathy for his dogged determination to find the ideal Ireland, and for his persistence in retaining the identity of Emmet, despite the evidence which is produced against him. In the degeneracy and triviality of the 1920's he searches for the "real" Ireland which for him is to be found at Rathfarnham, the scene of his final parting from Sarah Curran. But he is denied a seat on the first bus, and the second bus proves to be a tourist trip to a commercialized version of a vacationer's paradise, which is touted as a Tir na nOg, a Hy Brasail, a New Jerusalem, even a Yeatsian land of Hearts' Desire. (Part I, pp. 45-46). The ideal land of the blest has disappeared. Perhaps it has never existed except in the imaginations of Ireland's dreamers:

Speaker. I must go back to Rathfarnham. They will understand there.

Grattan. A shadowy land has appeared.

Speaker. Sally!

Grattan. Men thought it a region of Sunshine and Rest,
And they called it 'Rathfarnham', the Land
of the Blest.

Speaker. Oh if the will had wings, how fast I'd fly to the home of my heart!

Grattan. Poor weary footsore fool. And we are all the same, every one of us, whether we look to the foreigner for our sovereign or for our salvation. All of us fit to lead, and none of us fit to serve.

Speaker. If wishes were power, if words were spells
I'd be this hour where my true love dwells!

Grattan. Driven blindly on by the fury of our pitiable moral courage! Is there to be no rest for Ireland from her soul? What monstrous blasphemy has she committed to be condemned to drift for ever like the wandering Jew after a Heaven that can never be?
(Part I, p. 36)

Closely associated with the Speaker's search for Rathfarnham is his search for Sarah Curran, Emmet's loved one, another idealized incarnation of Cathleen ni Houlihan.

But Sarah Curran, like so many romantic dreams, belies the Speaker's conception of her, just as the historical Sarah belies Thomas Moore's song:

> She is far from the land
> Where her young hero sleeps,
> And lovers around her are sighing.
> But coldly she turns from their gaze, and weeps,
> For her heart in his grave is lying.

As Johnston points out in his Preface to the play, Sarah was faithless both to Emmet and to Ireland:

> Who cares that this reason for her absence from the land is the fact that she subsequently married an English officer, and ended her days happily with him elsewhere? For us, her heart will always be lying in Robert's grave. And lying is the operative word.
>
> (The Old Lady Says "No!", pp. 15-16)

The real Cathleen ni Houlihan is not the beautiful woman with the walk of a queen, but the Flower Woman, the "Old Lady" of the title. This image of Cathleen ni Houlihan as an old hag is first introduced in the popular nationalistic song of the Shan Van Vocht, and with it go all the implications of service and sacrifice which Ireland demands of her young men. Thus the Speaker's dream of Sarah Curran dissolves into the dingy reality of the old Flower Woman whose environment is the tenement slums of Dublin:

Sarah's Voice (singing)
She stretched forth her arms,
Her mantle she flung to the wind,
And swam o'er Loch Leane
Her outlawed lover to find . . .

Speaker. Sally! Sally! Where are you?

Sarah's Voice. Why don't you come to me, Robert? I have been waiting for you so long.

Speaker. I have been searching for you so long.

Sarah's Voice. I thought you had forgotten me.

Speaker. Forgotten you! Forgotten you, Sally! Is that your hand, dear? A cuisle geal mo chroidhe - 'Tis you shall have a silver throne - Her sunny mouth dimples with hope and joy: her dewy eyes are full of pity. It is you, Sally - Deirdre is mine: she is my Queen, and no man now can rob me!

(The lights go up. He is in the dingy room of a tenement house. . . . The Speaker himself is affectionately clasping the arm of the old Flower Woman. When he sees her he bursts into hysterical laughter.)

(Part II, pp. 70-71)

When he initially refuses to recognize the real Ireland, the Speaker finds that he in turn is denounced as a charlatan. He is attacked by a mob, and while defending himself he accidently shoots a young man. This victim of his illusions turns out to be the son of the Flower Woman, one of Cathleen's heroic patriots, and his death scene parodies the conventional selfless farewell of a national hero to this compatriots and to life:

Joe. Stench of the nut-brown clay
Piled high around the headstones and the yews,
My fingers clotted with the crusted clay,
My heart is singing . . . in the skies . . .

Older Man. You know, some of that stuff is very hard to follow. I'd sooner have the old stuff any day.
'Oh I met with Napper Tandy
An' he took me by the hand.'

Speaker. Ssssh!

> Joe (very soft). Well . . . so long, lads. It was . . . a grand life . . . so long, lad . . . that plugged me . . . So long . . . (He dies.)
>
> . . . . .
>
> Woman. One son with th' divil in hell, an' two more with th' divils on earth. (She spits.) God forgive me for weanin' a brood of sorry scuts!
>
> (Part II, pp. 75-76)

As the old woman well knows, the wars for "liberty" in Ireland are usually waged by drunken, vainglorious louts, who mouth patriotic slogans without any real comprehension of what they are doing.

But when he is called upon to account for the death of Joe, the Speaker can still shout his defiance of the Purgatory which is life, and assert the ideals which he must pursue, even if they have no relation to the muck and slime of the world:

> Yes, there is darkness now, but I can create light. I can separate the waters of the deep, and a new world will be born out of the void. A challenge, Norns! A gage flung down before you! Justify. Justify.
>
> (Part II, p. 81)

In a final burst of confidence he proclaims the philosophy of the heroic idealist, who must always sacrifice the individual to the idea:

> Cursed be he who values the life above the dream.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Cursed be he who builds but does not destroy.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Cursed be he who honours the wisdom of the wise.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Cursed be the ear that heeds the prayer of the dead.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Cursed be the eye that sees the heart of the foe.
>
> . . . . .

> Cursed be prayers that plough not, praises that reap not, joys that laugh not, sorrows that weep not.
>
> (Part II, p. 82)

Although such values are almost entirely negative and destructive, the emotional impact of the Speaker's assertions cannot be easily denied. He finally succeeds in imaginatively creating a heroic world, and the certainty of his beliefs may half persuade the onlookers to glimpse his world too, before the vision fades into the light of common day.

> Speaker. I will take this earth in both my hands and batter it into the semblance of my heart's desire! See, there by the trees is reared the gable of a house where sleeps my dear one. Under my feet the grass is growing, soft and subtle, in the evening dew. The cool, clean wind is blowing down from Killakee, kissing my hair and dancing with the flowers that fill the garden all around me. And Sarah . . Sarah Curran . . you are there . . waiting for Robert Emmet.
>
> . . . . .
>
> (He flings aside his sword and looks around him in triumph. It is very dark, so dark that for all we know perhaps it may be the garden of the first scene. Perhaps those may be the trees and the mountains beyond the Priory. For a moment we hear the tramp of feet and the distant sound of the Shan Van Vocht . . .)
>
> (Part II, p. 83)

Despite his scathing satire in The Old Lady Says "No!" Johnston does not entirely deny the value of the heroic dream, or the imaginative impact of Ireland's myths. Dublin may be a "Strumpet city", and Ireland little better than an old sow who devours her young, but the ideals and dreams of those who serve Cathleen ni Houlihan are none the less a force which cannot be entirely dismissed.

In A Bride for the Unicorn Johnston pulls together events and characters from divergent mythologies to reformulate the quest theme from the Odyssey. Like James Joyce he attempts to write the modern equivalent of ancient myth, and in fact he acknowledges that the mock-heroic technique of the play owes a great deal to Ulysses. A Bride for the Unicorn is a difficult play; it assumes a familiarity with Greek and Irish myths, and with the Jungian interpretation of myth. Hilton Edwards, who first produced the play at the Gate Theatre in 1933, considered that the demands it made upon the audience and upon the stage facilities would prove too exorbitant. He concluded that its structure was cumbersome and over-complex and the Ulysses theme "merely [inspired] a Greek feeling expressed through constant analogy."[17] Yeats's reaction to the Gate production was unequivocal; he walked out.

Johnston makes his satiric comments on modern society by juxtaposing the heroic deeds of the past with the trivial concerns of the present. The mythic frame of reference serves to impose a pattern on the aimless existence of modern man to establish an evaluative system by which this existence can be judged. Johnston establishes a mythic pattern through which his central character will move, and he reinforces the archetypal image of the journey through life with continual allusions to analogous mythologies. However, he sometimes becomes too involved in his own virtuosity: the incident portrayed in "Pandora's Box", for example, where Dora spills the contents of her suitcase on the floor, has no significant relationship with the hero's progress towards self-realization.

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[17] Hilton Edwards, "Denis Johnston," The Bell, 13, No. 1 (Oct., 1946), 13.

The modern Ulysses in A Bride for the Unicorn is John Foss, alias Mr. Phosphorus or Apollo. His travels through life, through the seasons and through the hours, are analogous both to the sun's journey through the heavens, and to the wanderings of Ulysses as he attempts to return to Ithaca and to Penelope, his bride. The play adopts the epic structure of twelve divisions, following the mythic pattern of birth, death and rebirth, and the linear pattern of the passage of time. The use of Irish myth as supportive analogy to this basically Greek pattern appears overly contrived and tends to narrow the frame of reference.

The play opens in a timeless region of the gods where man's destiny is determined like a piece of music on a keyboard. The lady pianist represents a "supernatural being sitting here in an aery timeless region, plotting out the affairs of mortals upon her piano."[18] The protagonists of the play, the Seven Companions of John, are all set a task and established within a mythology; in this case it is that of Jason and the Golden Fleece, a quest for beauty and truth. This quest also re-enacts the journey of the sun god:

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[18] Denis Johnston, A Bride for the Unicorn (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), p. 164. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition of the play.

> He. Gentlemen, gentlemen, have you got your lines? - Tonight we play this lady's composition - the Delphic Hymn in honour of the Sun. Together we seek the Golden Fleece. Romance - adventure - the hosting of the Paladins - war - feasting. . .
>
> (Prelude, p. 164)

The play supposedly asks the question "What is the time?" It explores temporal existence from the perspective of eternity. The immortals who initiate the action in the play remain as objective observers, only intervening at crucial moments to determine the ultimate fate of John Foss. "He" assumes the proportions of a statue of Lynceus, Navigator of the Argonauts, placed in a boy's school, and appears to enjoy the absurdities of a temporal existence. The school is conceived as a place of innocence, the starting point of the journey through life. John is invited to leave this embryonic existence and to accompany the mysterious Lady with the Mask into the world of experience, out into the formless world of cold winter to find the flower of love and beauty. It is time for rebirth and renewal:

My beloved spoke and said unto me,
Rise up my love, my fair one,
And come away.
For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over
and gone,
The flowers appear on the earth,

> The time of the singing of birds is come,
> And the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.[19]

Similarly John's school companions have finished their term and are about to seek the Golden Fleece. Johnston takes pains to ensure that the mythic analogies are not overlooked:

> Leonard. They are going out from amongst us upon the greatest of all adventures - Life. They are setting forth like those whom we studied on the classical side this term, in quest of the Golden Fleece - a solar simile of course.
> (Part II, p. 173)

John escorts his prospective Bride, the Masked Lady, to a hotel where he is advised by the Bust to assume heroic proportions in order to fulfill the requirements of a husband:

> Tell her how you captured Troy with your wooden horse. Tell her how you led the Golden Horde on Samarkand. Tell her of your extensive estates in Avalon.
> (Part III, p. 195)

Having tasted the delights of immortal love and beauty, however, John discovers that his lady has disappeared, and like the hero of so many myths and legends he must spend the rest of his life searching for her:[20]

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[19] A Bride for the Unicorn, Part II, p. 186. The poetry is of course from the Song of Solomon. The pattern of death and rebirth which is so prevalent in the play invites comparison with the themes of T. S. Eliot. A Bride for the Unicorn resembles Murder in the Cathedral in particular in its reliance on the poetic expression of seasonal images.

[20] Keats's Endymion and Shelley's Alastor come to mind here.

> Leonard. Now this is very interesting. A Lady is lost upon her nuptial night. A very common occurrence, you boys will recollect, in folklore and legend . . .
> There was Niam of the Golden Hair, daughter of the King of Tir na n'Og. She was stolen away from her lover. And then you may remember Dietrich of Berne, who spent many years seeking for Virginal, the Ice Queen, imprisoned by magicians.
> (Part III, pp. 205-206)

In the fourth section, entitled "Gods and Fighting Men" after Lady Gregory's work on Irish mythology, the Seven Companions each assume the proportions of a mythic hero, and set out to help John find his Lady. The initial consideration is to raise the necessary funds, but each hero becomes sidetracked in this occupation until he loses sight of the primary goal. Most become materially successful, but their social and political preoccupations become objects of ridicule from the broader perspective of true human values.

Since his night with the Lady, John has also assumed heroic proportions, but, nevertheless, he soon compromises his dream of the ideal by settling for a more mundane level of love. At the mid-point of his life, when the clock is striking noon, John has still not found the Lady, and the fate of his afternoon is the mediocrity and superficiality of domestic life with Doris. The title of Part VII, "The Fate of the Children of the Afternoon", underlines the contrast between this platitudinous existence and the tragic-heroic fates of the Tuatha de Danaan, the children of Lir, who were changed into swans for three hundred years by a jealous stepmother.[21] John eventually rebels against the stifling confines of his marriage and against the remorseless encroachment of age and death, which inevitably lessens his chances of finding the lady. But by the autumn of his life, despite his wider experiences and his acceptance of the necessity of temporality, he is still unsuccessful in his quest. It is only at the final gathering of the Companions that the Masked Lady finally reveals herself to John. The reality, the truth, which he has been seeking all his life, emerges as Death. Nevertheless, John embraces her gladly as the fulfillment of his journey. His marriage bed will be his grave; only through death can he come to a full realization of being. But his death is like that of Dionysius, of Adonis, of Christ, of the setting sun. It is not a finality, but a new beginning. He has achieved the immortal status of a mythic hero:

> Egbert. No, No! No mourning! No regrets! No crepe upon the door! No black-rimmed blasphemies! For now the story of his days is told, and all that he desired he has. Now he has outlived sorrow, and has his Mistress once again.
>
> Chorus. Woe, woe, Adonis is dead!
>
> Leonard. Pick up the corse, Companions. Spread the cloak, and bear him as the Paladins bore Charlemagne, to lie at last amongst the mighty names.
>
> (A Bride for the Unicorn, Coda, p. 299)

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[21] Part VII has strong associations with Eliot's The Cocktail Party. The elderly relative recalls the women of Conrad's Heart of Darkness, who endlessly knit the black skeins of fate.

Johnston is nothing if not ambitious in attempting to dramatize such an amorphous theme through an amalgamation of mythologies. In his subsequent plays he appears to retreat from such difficult enterprises, settling for the more popularly accessible form and theme. Irish myth makes a brief reappearance only in a much later play, The Scythe and the Sunset (1958), which Johnston wrote as an answer to O'Casey's The Plough and the Stars. Like O'Casey, Johnston has little patience with the false heroics and bravado which characterize Irish struggles for independence, and sees the theatre as a means of exploding such deceptions:

> Now assuming that this country of ours requires some good, healthy standards - and who would assert that it does not? - which does it require the most urgently? To get out of its age-long habit of romanticising people who cut throats or shoot policemen as a form of political self-expression? Or should we start off with a campaign to treat stage insobriety with a more becoming solemnity?[22]

But Johnston considers Irish women to be as radical as the men in their zeal for defending causes, and objects to O'Casey's delineation of female characters as pacifists. He thinks women the most vocal part of Ireland's militancy. Cathleen ni Houlihan is an appropriate symbol for the destructive feminine psyche which lures men to their deaths. In The Scythe and the Sunset, then, he sets out to destroy the false romanticism of national uprisings, and any misconceptions about the heroic commitments of the men, and the pacifying, stabilizing influence of the women. Emer nic Gabhann, a fiery Irish patriot who is willing to sacrifice everything and everyone to the cause, is a latter day version of Cuchulain's wife, a fierce goddess of battle, out of touch with the saner levels of existence. Her frenzied heroics are consistently undercut by the captured British Captain, Palliser, who defines heroism as second-rate ambition, another form of self-advertisement. According to Palliser, Emer and her lover, Tatley,"don't give a damn about liberty. All they care about is a cause. And causes always let you down."[23] Palliser's rather cynical pragmatism is reinforced by Doctor MacCarthy, who sees in Emer's heroism a basic sexual frustration: she is "Cuchulain's much neglected bride."

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[22] Johnston, "The Theatre", The Bell, 2, No. 4 (July, 1941), 79.

But it is not Johnston's intention either to parody O'Casey's play, which he considers his finest piece of writing, nor to debunk the Easter 1916 rebellion. He can recognize the genuine bravery as well as the gross inefficiency of both sides of the uprising. His satire attacks the false perspectives of the overly idealistic participants and their subsequent enshrinement in the national memory. Legendary heroes of the remote past or the recent past are less significant for him than ordinary men, albeit brave, "afflicted with doubts, and deficient in technical training."

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[23] Denis Johnston, "The Scythe and the Sunset," Act III, Collected Plays, p. 97.

Both Johnston's early expressionistic dramas, The Old Lady Says "No!" and A Bride for the Unicorn, are limited by their dependence upon obscure details of specific mythologies. However, myth has still remained the province of the satirist in modern Irish drama. One of the most recent to reinterpret the heroic past is Maurice Meldon.

Maurice Meldon wrote three plays centred around Irish myth during his short career as a dramatist. The Halcyon Horseman, described as "a satirical romp among the Fianna", was accepted but never produced by the Abbey, and his last play, No Moon for the Hunter, one in the series of reworkings of the legend of Diarmuid and Grania, has not been published or produced. Aisling: A Dream Analysis, was produced at the 37 Theatre Club in 1953. It has not been performed at the Abbey, despite its explicit preoccupation with national issues and its comprehensive treatment of Irish myth. Aisling is a satirical extravaganza, hitting out in every direction at social abuses in Ireland while retaining its good humour. Nothing in the grand mythical past, or the politically conscious present is sacred. Meldon continually juxtaposes this heroic past with the sordid present to show how the past has been fancifully recreated for the purpose of self-aggrandizement or political expediency.

Meldon's play is the dramatic representation of a dream or vision, the Gaelic word for dream being "aisling".

An "Aisling" is also a form of poetry which evolved in the eighteenth century among the Munster poets. In the Aisling, the poet is usually alone on a mountain, by a river, or on the seashore. He meets a beautiful lady, Cathleen ni Houlihan, who asks him to free her from slavery. The symbolic representation of Ireland as a young woman was necessitated by the fact that at this time patriotic songs were banned. The Aisling which begins Meldon's play is a good example of the genre. A translation is as follows:

> Walking in sorrow
> I saw before me
> The gentle, shining maiden,
> On a bare seashore
> She promised me
> That we would be married before Autumn.
> She sweetly promised
> That we would be married
> And went away as the mist vanishes
> Although I be mocked
> I believed without doubt,
> I am certain I will be with her forever.[24]

To convey the impression of dream, Meldon uses the techniques of expressionistic drama.[25] The play moves less through plot than through a rapid association of images: scenes change seemingly at random, time has no value. Moreover, Aisling is a pastiche of the styles and themes of other plays. Meldon's satirical technique works principally through parody, and his use of bathos depends on allusions to works by O'Casey, Synge and Lady Gregory, among others. His attitude to this unashamed filching is totally irreverent:

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[24] I am indebted to Mr. Michael J. Durkan, Assistant Librarian at the Olin Library, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, for this translation, and for the explanation of the Aisling as a poetic form.

[25] There are many similarities of style to Strindberg's The Dream Play, and to Johnston's The Old Lady Says "No!".

> Any resemblance to the styles of Shaw, O'Casey, Synge, Johnston, Gregory, Checkhov, Ibsen, Strindberg, O'Neill and Longford is purely intentional, and is even less coincidental than are the plagiarisms from these and other equally trustworthy sources.
>
> The author claims credit only for the assembly and for the spirit of disinterested dishonesty which enabled him to filch, unblushingly, the translated genius of so many distinguished people.[26]

In a Foreword to the Progress House edition of Aisling Seamus Kelly briefly outlines the rudimentary plot structure upon which the satirical sallies are hung:

> The action takes place in what is described as "Ireland's glorious past." It opens in the "Troubled Times" with a Dublin castle ordained auction of a young woman known variously as Deirdre, Maeve, Grainne, Emer, and Caithlin. She is rescued from the auction by young men in trench coats and goes on the run. When the action moves to post-Treaty Ireland, Caithlin, more preoccupied with fashion magazines than her old woes, meets a poet called Mullarkey and agrees to marry him, but a clergyman disapproves of the couple's 'morality' and sends them on the run again. The lovers take a short trot through the gaudy past of the composite Caithlin-Emer-Grania-Maeve with attendant lovers in period. In the final scene, they appear before a County Council whose ward Caithlin is.[27]

They are refused permission to marry. Mullarkey is forced to emigrate and Caithlin is once more put up for sale, thus bringing the play full circle, the indication being that the attitude of the Irish towards the values of truth and freedom changes little.

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[26] Maurice Meldon, Aisling: A Dream Analysis (Dublin: Progress House, 1959).

[27] Seamus Kelly, Foreword to Aisling, no page.

The composite character of Caithlin-Emer-Grania-Maeve functions as a multiple symbol which unifies the play and provides many opportunities for satire. Her identity is always in doubt. Initially it is disputed by the chorus of women who await her auctioning at the beginning of Act I. At this point, Caithlin is a potentially dangerous political symbol. The gunman, Liam, who dies in the attempt to set her free, thinks of her only in terms of a cause, "The best cause there is in the world" (Aisling, Act I, p. 9). The attitude of the English Major General is considerably more pragmatic, albeit a bit obtuse. He cannot conceive how the Irish could be aroused over the impending auction of the girl since "they'll have a chance to buy her for themselves." (Act I, p. 6) Through the differing levels of awareness of the women, the gunman and the Major General, Meldon builds up the complex symbolic significance of Caithlin. She is what others think she is.

In Act II she is transformed from a homeless waif to the Queen of Ireland. The whole sequence is a parody of Yeats's play Cathleen ni Houlihan, depicting the blind idealism of the young man Donal who goes down the road of single-minded heroics only to be shot. Meldon takes the implied tragedy of Yeats's play one step further and robs it of idealism by implying that Caithlin is no more than a personal dream which evaporates when subjected to the hard facts of everyday life. Donal Ryan is an imaginative young man who is highly susceptible to the illusions of others:

> My mother's father was a Fenian, and 'twas she that told me all the stories of the fighting men that set my blood on fire.
>
> (Act II, p. 27)

When he begins to doubt the reality of the cause he seeks, he is easily moved by the lyrical blandishments of Cathleen ni Houlihan, a siren who lures him to his death:

> Four green fields they had, each of them stretching out as far as the eye could see and well beyond. And all around, you'd hear the whispering of the sea on grey shore and golden sand. . . . Out of the long grass of the meadows, into the bright blue sky of the morning, the larks would go soaring up and up. . .
>
> (Act II, p. 29)

When she laments the lost world of happiness and innocence, the girl assumes the role of Deirdre. She likes the name of Deirdre best "Because it's soft and lonely and it's easy for the wind in the tall trees to whisper it and tell the world of sadness" (Act I, p. 18). The echo of J. M. Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows is unmistakeable here. But once the fighting is over Caithlin-Deirdre is entirely forgotten. Her stature as national symbol is reduced to that of a common Irish woman who reads "Novels, blood-curdlers, English sunday papers and fashion magazines" (Act II, p. 33). It is only through the exertions of Mullarkey, the poet, that she regains a character worthy of loyalty and affection. Her final impassioned plea for freedom again echoes the tragic lyricism of Synge's Deirdre:

> I was born for freedom; for going my own way on the road I'd choose - puzzling the strange shapes of the cloudy skies. . . . I was born with every woman's dream: and another dream: a dream of silver change scattered across a dark lake when the moon was full. . . . Don't bind me to a world I have no love for. Don't bind me to a dream I haven't had the making of.
> (Act III, p. 77)

Meldon's happiest creation in *Aisling* is the poet Padraigeen Mullarkey, who provides a stabilizing humanity for the multiplicity of myth and symbol in the play. True to his name, which means "bunkum" or "blarney,"[28] he has the proverbial gift of the gab, and he engages Caithlin in lively conversation when he meets her on the road. His primary interest is in himself; he has the artist's all-subsuming ego:

> There's only five topics of conversation that are worth a damn: Politics, Religion, the Weather, telling lies about your neighbour and telling what you'd like to think was the truth about yourself. Now, I've little time for Politics, I couldn't be bothered with Religion: to hell with the Weather. For the moment, my neighbours are beneath my contempt. So, there's only myself left. And who can say more about myself than I can?
> (Act II, p. 33)

But Mullarkey has need of a country for his art and for his personal salvation, and he recognizes in the girl the softening influence which will prevent him from turning bitter and sour. He refuses to see her as the modern slattern "Kate", however, preferring her as the more inspiring and noble "Cathlin". Their new-found friendship is vehemently discouraged by the parish priest who beats them out of the bushes with his stick in the style of Father Domineer in Cock-a-Doodle Dandy and of the Priest in The Tinker's Wedding. Fleeing the harsh reality of the present, they assume the roles of the mythical figures of Irish antiquity. However, Meldon inverts the heroic associations of these figures. Each sequence is acted out in a setting antipathetic to everything heroic: the first is set in a pub and the second in a brothel. Moreover, the characters are quarrelsome, selfish and conceited; their speech is colloquial and vulgar. Meldon thus completely deflates all the pretentiousness which has accumulated around the Irish heroic material.

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[28] *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Jess Stein (New York: Random House, 1966).

The Cuchulain-Emer episode is set in a Public House, complete with National flag against the wall, a backdrop which recalls that of O'Casey's anti-heroic play, The Plough and the Stars. Moreover, the whole pub scene is strongly reminiscent of Juno and the Paycock. All spurious forms of heroism are subjected to ridicule, as the song of the drunk illustrates:

> But, when the dreamer's dream came true
> That drove the Saxon out,
> He died - as men like him should do -
> From lowerin' pints of stout.
> (Act III, p. 49)

Into this chaotic scene step the girl and Padraigeen, playing the roles of Emer and Cuchulain in a travelling troup. Once more they mechanically repeat their lines. Cuchulain, the glorious national hero, is strongly identified with British Northern Ireland by his Ulster accent. His death is depicted through a series of overblown speeches which parody the rhetoric of Standish O'Grady:

> Cuchullan (A strong Ulster accent). What sound was that? I hear the feet of marching men. Fire burns against my cheek. I am the centre of a great wound that bleeds upon Murthemney.
>
> . . . . . . . . . . .
>
> Cuchullan will not sleep again. Ulster will fight and Ulster will be right. (He snatches imaginary weapons and faces an imaginary foe.) My eyelids sleep upon my eyes.
>
> (Act III, p. 51)

His final emotional tirade suddenly assumes a direct political relevance, which becomes absurd in the context of the speech:

> Here stands Cuchullan facing the invader. Bring word to Concobhair that, in my shape, the might of Ulster perished in sorrow, loneliness and desolation. Say that my spirit has outrun the flesh and cries to all the world: Cuchullan dies . . . and NO SURRENDER!
>
> (Act III, p. 52)

Emer's repeated lyrical refrain serves only to convey her monumental boredom and indifference:

> Emer (casually). Sad is the tale of the passing of greatness.
>
> (Act III, p. 52)

The police arrive in pursuit of Mullarkey and the girl, and the scene is immediately changed to the inside of a brothel. Caithlin assumes the role of Grania, by implication a prostitute, and Padraigeen plays the part of Diarmuid. The humour of this episode depends on an assumed knowledge of Lady Gregory's version of the legend. Grania's plaintive appeals and Diarmuid's cold rebuffs parody the lyrical dialogue in Gods and Fighting Men:

> And Grania said: "O Diarmuid of the face like snow or like the down of the mountains, the sound of your voice was dearer to me than all the riches of the leader of the Fianna. . . ."
>
> "My heart fell down there and then before your high beauty: when you came beside me, it was like the whole of life in one day."
>
> "O Diarmuid of the beautiful hands, take me now the same as before; it was with me the fault was entirely; give me your promise not to leave me."
>
> But Diarmuid said: "How can I take you again, you are a woman too fond of words; one day you give up the Head of the Fiannia, the next day myself, and no lie in it.
>
> "It is you parted me from Finn, the way I fell under sorrow and grief; and you left me yourself, the time I was full of affection."29

Meldon points to the absurdity of the situation by humanizing the protagonists. Diarmuid is a self-indulgent, narrow-minded prig, concerned only with his reputation, and consequently furious with Grania for forcing him to take her away from Finn. The scene opens with his frantic search for the loaf which he must leave for Finn as a token of his fidelity; he guards his chastity with more vigor than does Joseph Andrews. Every lyrical blandishment offered by Grania he renders ridiculous with a facetious use of anachronism:

Grania Is Diarmuid Ui Dyna afraid to meet death?

Diarmuid No. Merely irritated by his premature introduction to it. You have to admit there's a certain reasonableness in that.

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[29] Lady Gregory, Gods and Fighting Men (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1970), p. 295.

Grania (Pouting) Perhaps you'd like to return me to Finn?

Diarmuid I would. I'd give six feats of heroism to restore the status quo.
(Act III, p. 54)

Similarly, Finn is far from being the amorphous giant of Irish romance. He is "an elderly, amiable, commercially cunning man", quick to assess the situation and to gain by it. He ridicules Grania's supposed virtue, and Grania retaliates by emphasizing his age. True to form, Diarmuid loudly protests his innocence:

> I was compromised. I was inveigled. I was seduced - from my allegiance, of course. Finn, I want you to believe that I am - and always have been, if not a gentleman, at least a man of scrupulous honour, unsullied integrity and unwavering principle. All through my life, even in the face of the most persistent temptation, I have kept my geasa.
> (Act III, p. 56)

Diarmuid welcomes his death as a form of martyrdom, but Finn sentences him to a fate far worse than death, marriage to Grania.

Meldon's satire continually undermines the conceptions popularized by Ferguson and O'Grady, that the legendary heroes were models of virtue and honour, and that Ireland's heroic past was a Golden Age. If pagan society is to be regarded as an ideal, then the coming of Christianity can only be seen as a plague from the east, with values that are antithetical to all those of ancient Ireland. Defending the integrity of Ireland against such forms of modern pollution are Caoilte, president of the Pagan Purity Society, and Fear Uasail Ua

Murracoo of the Goidelic League.

The third excursion into the past focusses on the quarrel between Maeve and Ailill which precipitated the Cattle Raid of Cooley. It lacks the direct contact between present and past which provides the pungent irony of the Cuchulain and Grania episodes. Meldon directs his satire in this case against religion and superstition: Maeve, a pagan goddess, uses a Christian chaplain as "a reference in matters of faith and morals." (Act III, p. 61) However, he fails to explore the possibilities of the story and simply uses the legendary characters as tags for his satire.

The scene shifts back to the present, depicting yet another sell-out of Ireland to the stranger, the proceeds of which will go to further the cultural life of the nation:

> This money will be devoted to the use of the Cultural Commission recently set up to present an analytical report on the chemical composition of our renowned Celtic Twilight.
>
> (Act III, p. 67)

Ireland's real problems are ignored, and its artists are driven out by ignorance and repression. Mullarkey's bid for Caithlin fails, and he lacks the heroic stature to fight for her: "When we're young, talk is cheap. But, I haven't the build of a hero nor even the mental approach of a doer of deeds. Fighting is only for strong men or for fools" (Act III, p. 80). Caithlin is sold into slavery as "the choicest item in the entire programme of ex-Imperial effects" (Act III, p. 78), and Padraigeen goes "Across the sea, melting old memories and casting the metal in different moulds" (Act III, p. 80).

The satire in Aisling is not entirely negative, however. By lampooning the false heroics of a mythical past which has been paraded as an ideal, Meldon implies that ingrained assumptions and attitudes are often erroneous. We must constantly reassess the present and the past in terms of more basic human values. Myth can only be a vehicle for truisms when it has been purged of distorted interpretation. The legends of Diarmuid, Cuchulain and Maeve have so congealed into popular national stories that they are prime targets for parody.

Like The Old Lady Says "No!", Aisling depends for most of its effect on a knowledge of Irish myth and a familiarity with the works of specific dramatists. For these reasons the satiric force of Aisling would be lost on an uninformed audience. But the wit and irony in the play are worth the effort necessary to understand the mythic allusions. Like O'Casey, Meldon sees further than the Irish situation into the heart of humanity.

Irish myth still provides material for the satirist on the Dublin stage. The world premiere of The Patrick Pearse Motel[30] by Hugh Leonard in the 1971 Dublin Theatre Festival proved to be a popular success, and it has subsequently played to German and Canadian audiences. The characters in The Patrick Pearse Motel all have mythic names: Dermod Gibbon, Grainne Gibbon, Fintan Kinnore, Niamh Kinnore, James Usheen, and Hoolihan. The significance of these names is explained in a programme footnote, but it is apparent that such allusions are now widely known, and as a result humour or satire can be based on a common set of assumptions. Lady Gregory's intentions for the folk material and legends of her country have been realized at least in part; Cuchulain, Finn, Oisin, Deirdre, Grania and Maeve have been fully instated as popular national figures.

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[30] This play has not yet been published.

# CONCLUSION

There can be no doubt that myths constitute an inexhaustible source of material for drama. Although the Greek tragedies of the fifth century B. C. still influence any attempt to write mythically-based plays, modern dramatists continue to experiment with the legends which are so deeply rooted in the imaginations of men. The heroes of such myths are usually superhuman cultural heroes, specific personalities rather than types, working out their own destinies and the destinies of their particular societies. Their lineage is carefully detailed to reinforce their heroic status, and they are attached to a particular region or country. At the same time, however, their actions are set back in a timeless past, an ideal heroic world or "Golden Age", when all men were brave and all women fair. Most myths have a serious underlying purpose; the quest of the hero has profound consequences for the fate of mankind. The action is usually complicated and episodic, providing a wide range of material for adaptation by dramatist or poet. Moreover, the story is rarely governed by the dictates of logic and reason; it is highly suggestive and fantastical, and invites concrete, structured formulations.

Any generalized definition of myth necessarily overlooks the many forms which myth takes in relation to the society from which it evolved. Some myths are more obviously ritualistic or religious in form, others provide sanctions for tribal customs. Irish myth, like Greek myth, is pseudo-historical rather than ritualistic in its nature. Its loosely-structured legends describe the cultural evolution of a nation; it cannot be construed as a significant attempt to explain life by arranging it in an allegorical pattern. There is little speculative or operative content in Irish myth. The emphasis is always on external action; it rarely attempts to reflect the workings of the mind. Such legendary myth "glorifies famous leaders and tribal history by telling of wars and victories, or disguises contradictions between national ideals and actuality."[1] Its tone is usually strongly patriotic. Traditional memories or elaborate historical fiction provides a basis for highly dramatic narrative.

The dramatic potential of Irish myth, with its strong characterizations and abundance of physical detail, was recognized by Samuel Ferguson. But he was more attracted to the patriotic flavour of these legends. The heroes of the Fianna and of Ulster became nationalistic symbols, and Ireland's heroic age was interpreted as an example of past glory, and an inspiration for a potential cultural and political reawakening. Standish O'Grady further reinforced the nationalistic tone of the legends of his country and strengthened the image of Cuchulain as a national hero, a form of Irish Achilles.

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[1] G. S. Kirk, Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 254.

The redefinition of Irish myth by Lady Gregory was to prove more directly influential on Irish art, however. Yeats enthusiastically declared that her Gods and Fighting Men and Cuchulain of Muirthemne compared with Homer's works, and although such a claim might be somewhat exaggerated, as James Joyce believed, it must be acknowledged that her translations are analogous to the Iliad and the Odyssey at least in respect to their influence on the popular dissemination of national myth, and on the drama which subsequently emerged from this awakening interest. The literary development of Irish myth parallels that of Greek myth, evolving through a stage of selection and codification, and a stage of reinterpretation by poets and dramatists. G. S. Kirk's evaluation of the fifth century B. C. Greek tragedians could be applied on a minor scale to the Irish dramatists of the twentieth century:

> They took the transitional and schematized mythology as a datum, and with new interests and techniques constructed out of it an erratic but vivid new world of myths, in which the preoccupations of contemporary society were reflected against the background of traditional narrative situations. Neither of these two stages of manipulation should be underrated. Both were subtle and intelligent, and required a sensitive response to the old vision; both resulted in a new mythical dimension.[2]

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[2] Kirk, p. 251.

Lady Gregory, however, was more interested in the folklore of Ireland when she dramatized the stories of the past for the Abbey Theatre. Although the aspects of this folklore may overlap with those of heroic myth, there is a distinct difference in presentation and tone. Folktales are characterized by their use of trickery or ingenuity; they exemplify a kind of wish-fulfilment fantasy. Character is subordinated to situation, and the characters are usually easily recognizable types.[3] Most of Lady Gregory's plays are based on folktales, and, as a result, are light in tone, whimsical and more intentionally entertaining than didactic. Plays based on myth, as is her Grania, are more serious in intent, and usually define a specific cultural hero or heroine.

The nationalistic purposes of the earliest dramatic presentations of myth are readily apparent. Because such playwrights as George Russell, Edward Martyn and Alice Milligan chose to develop the political implication of Irish myth, they necessarily limited the accessibility of their plays. To overcome the limitations of parochialism, the artist must reinterpret his sources with a more wide-reaching point of view. Yeats gradually evolved an approach to Irish myth which, while retaining the unique flavour of an Irish cultural environment, projected a vision of life which was universally valid. Cuchulain remained a national symbol, but gained the stature of a universal mythic hero. Yeats's approach to the undefined problems inherent in Irish legends was direct and explicit. G. S. Kirk's assessment of the Greek tragedians could well be applied to Yeats:

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[3] This distinction between myth and folktale is made by Kirk, pp. 38 & 39.

> The myths themselves, however, still carry fragmentary overtones of the past; and this, combined with the poetic side of the dramatic vision, as well as with the direct application of mythical situations to contemporary problems, produces a very remarkable effect: a kind of new mythology.[4]

Yeats's dramatization of myth is, then, mythopoeic. His considerable influence on the evolution of Irish drama cannot be undervalued, and his own experimental approaches to his mythic sources provide a pattern for the development of drama away from the hazy atmosphere and the nationalistic themes of the turn of the century to the concrete personal approach of many twentieth century writers. Paradoxically, however, Yeats's plays have never received a wide acceptance. Although some are regarded as supreme examples of symbolic drama, they have not been successfully produced outside of a limited academic environment. As exempla for theory they provide fertile territory for the student of literature, but they are rarely staged by the more pragmatic directors of commercial theatres. Their success depends too much on a production by a very talented company of actors, singers, dancers and musicians, not to mention a sensitive designer and choreographer. Although Yeats's plays should not be dismissed as being too turgid and obscure, they can only be appreciated after a concerted effort has been made to understand his personalized vision of Irish myth.

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[4] Kirk, p. 251.

Sean O'Casey's interpretation of Irish myth is more accessible because he expands his legendary figures to fit the lineaments of all men, and sets them in plays which depend more on dramatic effect than on aesthetic sensibility. However, O'Casey was sensitive to the underlying currents of the myths he used. He exploited to advantage the amoral atmosphere of the Irish legends, which define values in terms of practical human relationships and not in terms of divine dictates. Although the ancient gods and goddesses of Ireland are given their due in the early stories, they are only vaguely defined and merge with the more temporal heroes. As Yeats observed, there is an interpenetration of gods and men which precludes any rigid distinctions between mortality and immortality. O'Casey captures the exuberant pagan spirit which emerges from the myths, the zest for life, and the irreverent attitude towards the gods. Morality is defined in terms of the human values of comradeship, generosity and loyalty. This worldly philosophy is diametrically opposed to the more clearly defined spiritual values of Christianity. It is this conflict of values which permeates many of O'Casey's plays. His more practical mythology acknowledges the roots of Irish tradition, while recognizing its universality.

Unlike Yeats, whose plays are for the most part without any lightening presence of humour, O'Casey adopts an irreverent attitude towards mythic heroes. This detached ironic stance has subsequently hardened into the more specific satire of Denis Johnston and Maurice Meldon. Such satire depends for its effect on a detailed knowledge of Irish myth and its nationalistic trappings. The theatre established by Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge to bring back the ancient idealism has become a theatre of contemporary values in which the motif of Cuchulain and his hound has become an object of parody. This shift from the idealism of Standish O'Grady through the earthy colloquialism of J. M. Synge to the satiric bite of Johnston can be seen as a cyclical pattern evolving from the responses of each dramatist to the current climate of ideas and to the way in which these ideas were formulated on the stage. Yeats's theory of the winding and unwinding gyres, each cycle in turn begetting a reactionary cycle, also applies to the changes in Irish drama and to the strange inconsistencies of his own Abbey Theatre:

> Things thought too long can be no longer thought,
> For beauty dies of beauty, worth of worth,
> And ancient lineaments are blotted out.[5]

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[5] Yeats, "The Gyres", ll. 2-4. Variorum Poems, p. 564.

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# APPENDICES

# APPENDIX A

The love triangle of Diarmuid, Grania and Finn was to prove as challenging to Irish dramatists and poets as the story of Tristan and Isolde was to English artists. In both myths the external operations of magic determine the fate of the lovers, and the question of personal responsibility is not clarified. Yeats and Moore failed to resolve the difficulties inherent in the Diarmuid and Grania story in their dramatic version. Lady Gregory's more pragmatic *Grania* (1907) was followed by Austin Clarke's *The Vengeance of Finn* (1918). Clarke's dramatic poem recalls the vague atmosphere of the Celtic Twilight: an aging Grania remembers her youth and laments the passing of love and beauty.

The young Michéal MacLiammoir, like Clarke an admirer of the poetic style of the early Yeats, attempted a Gaelic version of the Diarmuid and Grania story in 1927 for a group of Irish players in Galway, the Taibhdhearc na Gaillemhe. Neither the Gaelic original nor the English translation has been published, however, and there exists for critical inspection only MacLiammoir's comments on his play in his autobiographical work, *All For Hecuba*. *Diarmuid agus Grainne* evokes the same faery world of mystic beings which AE explored:

> I would take a train to Howth and climb the familiar places among the heather, blossoming now in lavish purple leagues of solitude, and here it would be easier to write, perhaps because the Irish language breathes more freely among rocks and furze blooms and the sound of wild birds, where it is still alive, than in the hotel rooms of cities, where it is so plainly sick unto death. Besides, the persons of the play were real here, and tradition has it that at least one of the most important episodes took place among the very hills where I lay with note-book and pencil. Sometimes they would seem to rise up out of the heather at my side, and look at me for a moment before they turned to walk out of sight into the empty air, those tall shining figures I was dreaming of: Fionn with his winged helmet and his heavy tread, his mantle floating in the wind, his hounds fawning at his feet, his immortal son, Oisin, the poet, at his side; or Diramuid would pass, dark and grave and laughing, with his cap of eagle feathers pulled low over his fatal brow; or Grainne herself would peer into my eyes, the locks of bewildering honey-gold hair blowing about the temples, the dreaming oval face as white as milk, a little shadow of mockery lying like a faint laughter over the red mysterious mouth.[1]

But what sounded heroic and dramatic in Gaelic translated badly into English. MacLiammoir felt that it seemed "like an expurgated version of _Salomé_ through which the twilight winds of a ninetyish Celticism [had] swept, paling the colour and purging the fatty richness of a masterpiece and turning Wilde's monstrous orchid into a wet bullrush."[2] When he saw a London performance of his play, MacLiammoir was horrified at the "dim and soulful" spectacle on the stage, a "monotonous and dopey elaboration of an old

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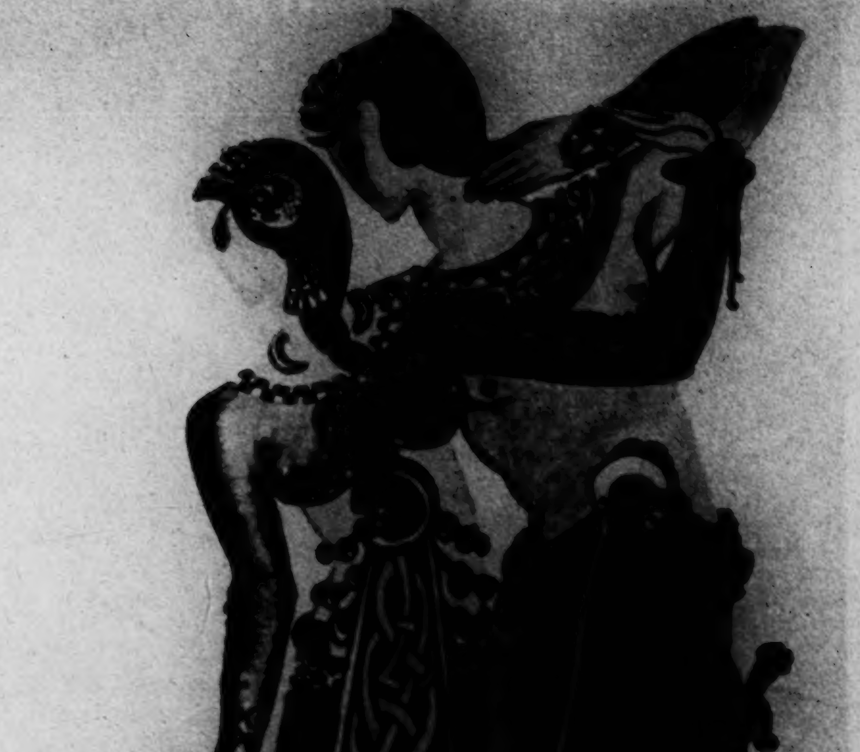
[1] Michéal MacLiammoir, _All for Hecuba_ (Boston: Brandon Press, 1967), p. 41.

[2] _Ibid_., p. 43.



Diarmuid and Grainne
Costume Designs by Micheal MacLiammoir

tragic tale", a tasteful compromise between Maeterlinck and the Love Songs of Connacht."[3] He recognized that for him at least, the Celtic Twilight was dead, "a worn-out, borrowed garment from the last generation but one"[4], and that if he was to write again, all must come from within himself. In the twenties and thirties, "those days of self-conscious virility and neurasthenic fact-finding", the Celtic Twilight was at its lowest ebb, and there was no place "for echoing the vanished rhapsodies of the nineties".[5] Despite these realizations, however, MacLiammoir had difficulty extracting himself from the world of dream and myth. He was, like Yeats, inclined more towards the spiritual than the mundane, and understood fully how his mythical tendencies would impede any popular reception for his plays:

> I am fascinated by the moods and sensations of the human mind; by dreams, by magic, by personages of folk-lore and myth, and also by the occurrence among ordinary people of extraordinary things. . . . I find myself more at home among the images of what is popularly termed fantasy than in the world of social or political problems.[6]

At the same time, however, MacLaimmoir asserted the necessity for continually searching for the basic roots of Irish life, which lay in the traditions and legends of the past. In the years during and after World War II the state of Irish letters was particularly moribund; the values exalted during the country's literary renaissance were dead or dying and the country was devoid of critical taste:

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[3] *Ibid.*, p. 146.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 147.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 66.

[6] MacLiammoir, *Theatre in Ireland* (Dublin: Sign of the Three Candles, 1950), p. 40.

> Ireland, her dim and endless enchantments withdrawing far into the recesses of her earth like the Tuatha Dé Danaan of ancient times, had shrunk distressingly as far as we were concerned, and become as George Moore so continually discovered, no broader than a pig's back. There were moments of despair when one could see nothing of her but poverty and ignorance and cant. . . .
>
> Well, we must dig. If Ireland had buried her enchantments we must dig for them. There was gold hidden in the heart of her mountains; deep in the far earth there was gold, far out of sight of crawling mists and sounds of birds crying through the rain the eternal alchemy went on.7

MacLiammoir continued to experiment with myth in his own theatre, the Gate, when it was established in 1929 as an alternative to the Abbey Theatre. The Gate often featured "Celtic" plays with stylized designs by MacLiammoir, including Diarmuid agus Gráinne.

Despite the shattering realities of political upheaval, and the critical backlash against the dream of a romantic Ireland, Irish myth was still being dramatized in the sixties. Padraic Fallon's radio play about Diarmuid

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[7] All for Hecuba, pp. 310-11.

and Grania was particularly successful,[8] and testifies to the current vitality of myth in modern Irish drama.

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[8] Robert Hogan is particularly impressed with Fallon's play: "by making Diarmuid and Grainne larger than nature - magical - by even making them blend into the elements of nature, he intends a parable illustrating fully and finally certain aspects of man's nature." (*After the Irish Renaissance* [Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1967], pp. 160-61.) Unfortunately, Fallon's manuscript has not been published and is not available for closer analysis.

# APPENDIX B

George Fitzmaurice's dramatic fantasies are highly imaginative interpretations of the starkest aspects of peasant life, expressed through the rhythmic speech of Kerry, a dialect as rich in Gaelic cadences as that used by Synge in The Playboy of the Western World. Fitzmaurice's first play, The Country Dressmaker, was produced by the Abbey in the same year as The Playboy of the Western World, and shares Synge's gently sardonic view of man's weakness and stupidity. Most of Fitzmaurice's plays could be termed "dark comedies"; they explore the more grotesque, even sinister side of human nature, and the superstitions and fears of Irish folk belief. The pagan beliefs of the Irish people can be either vital or destructive. In The Pie-Dish (1908), for example, the old man, Leum, is determined to finish his ornate clay dish before he dies, to create something permanent and significant in defiance of the inconsequence of his life. His struggle against time and death is in direct opposition to the Christian emphasis on submission to God and on acceptance of mortality:

> Leum (giving a dazed look around him). Was it the priest said my hour has come? (Straightens himself up suddenly, holding pie-dish between his hands. He goes a step towards corner of table.) It's black lies he is telling me. 'Tisn't my hour that has come to me. Good God above in heaven, 'Tisn't without mercy you would be and

> to take me out of the world like this! Oh, the pain that's through me! Good God, give me time - it's surely you'll give me time - I pray for time to finish my pie-dish! Isn't this a terrible pain entirely? (Shakes) 'tis killing me that pain is. Good God in heaven, it's time I must get - if it isn't time from God I'll get, maybe the devil will give me time! Let the devil himself give me time, then, let him give me time to finish my pie-dish, and it's his I'll be for ever more, body and soul![1]

Leum's daughter and grandsons interpret his fanatical determination to be the result of an enchantment, and there is an air of evil associated with such a destructive obsession.

Similarly in The Dandy Dolls, the pagan elements take on a decidedly macabre and grotesque character.[2] The play balances between the world of reality and the mythic world of demons and spirits. The Grey Man, for example, initially appears in Carmody's cottage as a common itinerant, but he gradually assumes the proportions of a legendary figure:

> Roger. 'Tis now I recollect. (drawing back in terror) Glory be to God, then, who is it? Glory be to God, 'tisn't one of the three Grey Men you are, who dwell in that rock in the heart of the fearsome bay of Doon, and come out on the battlements terrifying the people when the sea is roaring in the wild and dreary nights?[3]

Like Leum, Roger has an obsessive desire to perfect one thing before he dies.

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[1] George Fitzmaurice, "The Pie-Dish," Five Plays (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1917), p. 154.

[2] A more recent playwright, John B. Keane, also explores the grotesque side of Irish folk-myth in Sharon's Grave (1961): the deep-rooted superstitions of the country people are manifestations of repressed sexual desires and stifled dreams.

[3] "The Dandy Dolls", Five Plays, p. 191.

The Dandy Dolls was rejected by the Abbey, and was not produced until 1945 by Austin Clarke's Lyric Theatre. Ironically, Yeats's The Death of Cuchulain shared the bill. Fitzmaurice regarded Yeats's "cult of the fairies" with a mildly ironic eye and wrote The Linnaun Shee as a satire on this particular facet of Yeats's art. The play's theme is a variation of a recurrent motif in Irish folklore: a man is lured away from his loved one by an old hag who appears beautiful in his eyes.

The Enchanted Land is Fitzmaurice's most concerted attempt to incorporate elements of Irish myth into his work. It was published in the Dublin Magazine in 1957, but has never been produced. Its apparent neglect is quite understandable, since it is by far the weakest of Fitzmaurice's plays. The flimsy plot is protracted over three acts by an endless series of quarrels between minor characters, and the amplification of the Gaelic idiom becomes increasingly tedious. Fitzmaurice incorporates several figures from Irish mythology into his own imaginative world, but they all bring with them residues of Greek mythology which cloud their significance. The initial setting, for example, the Under-sea habitation of Mananaan, evokes the Underworld of Greek mythology more than it does the traditionally Irish one of the Country-Under-Wave, or Tir na nOg. The hero, Aeneas, who searches for his loved one in this land, is more like Orpheus than Oisin. Although the play is an intentionally comic rendering of Irish myth, its humour is often painfully facetious:

> Aeneas. (trembling, looking upwards) Who is up there, speaking, I'm asking again. As a king it's my right to know.
>
> Voice above (deeply, sonorously). Speaking, speaking?
> I am the hound of Mananaan and I graze the deep - Aw-hee; oh-hoo; ah-hah! Great Mananaan's orders are the orders that I keep, aw-hee, oh-hoo, ah-hah!
> The hatches are laid and the ship will soon go
> And he who'st not ready will stay down below;
> Make haste then, make haste I've a pain in my head,
> And it's badly I'm wanting to go to bed -
> aw-hee, oh-hoo, ah-hah![4]

The Enchanted Land lacks any consistent comic or satiric direction. Fitzmaurice writes better within the tighter confines of the one-act play, where he can more clearly articulate a mood or an atmosphere through the use of folk belief. In such plays as The Magic Glasses, The Pie-Dish and The Dandy Dolls, he has according to Bryan McMahon, "the authentic poetic gift of making the strange familiar and the familiar strange.[5]

Like Fitzmaurice, Bryan McMahon is attracted to Ireland's folk and mythic traditions. In The Song of the Anvil (1960), he dramatizes the basic need for imaginative reality in the dull everyday routine. When the dream of the Golden Folk, woven by the story-teller Ulick Madrigan, is exploded by the harsh intrusion of actuality, then the peasants demand that their priest, Father O'Priest McHugh, tell them stories of mythical giants and heroic deeds:

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[4] Fitzmaurice, "The Enchanted Land" I, Dramatic Fantasies (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1967), p. 90.

[5] Quoted from the Introduction by Howard K. Slaughter to George Fitzmaurice, Folk Plays (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1969), p. viii.

*Father O'Priest*. What do you want of me?

*Deborah*. I'll tell you! We want stories and tales.

*Kitsy*. We want accounts of women of beauty and they tied to wheels!

*Paddy-Twin*. Swords of sharpness and giants, too!

*Mick-Twin*. Shoes of swiftness that race on the hills!

*Ellenrose*. Cloaks of darkness that make the wearer disappear!

*Garrett Gowa*. We want horses with hooves of bronze, they racing on a lake, blood spilled on the ground, and planets overthrown.[6]

In response to these demands Father O'Priest tells the miraculous tales of "Christy Love", glossing the Christian message with the glamour and excitement of pagan myth. Like Synge, McMahon creates a world of fantasy which is rooted in the coarser aspects of life.

Of the more recent Irish dramatists to explore the potential of the folk imagination which Synge so skilfully interpreted, the most promising has been Michael Molloy. His plays[7] treat the deeply-rooted habits and customs of

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[6] Bryan McMahon, "Song of the Anvil," *Seven Irish Plays*, ed. Robert Hogan (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1967), p. 243.

[7] Several of Molloy's plays have been produced at the Abbey Theatre: *The Visiting House* in 1946, *The King of Friday's Men* in 1948, *The Paddy Pedlar* in 1953, and *The Will and the Way* in 1955. The more recently published plays are *The Wood of the Whispering*, 1961, *The Old Road*, 1961, and *Daughter from Over the Water*, 1963.

Irish life with ironic good humour. All are characterized by what Frank O'Connor calls "the backward look", an undertone of melancholy and regret for a dying past, and an abhorrence of the materialism of the present. Irish myth and folk-belief as a living part of the traditional values of the countryside are fading from memory. In The Visiting House Molloy explores the nature of Irish myth as it is entrenched in the imaginations of the old storyteller, pitting it against the artifically inseminated "learning" of the schools.

The play is set in one of the last of Ireland's "Visiting Houses", "those institutions that kept Irish folklore alive for a thousand years and left it with one of the greatest folklore libraries on paper and tape of any country in the world."[8] Mickle Conlon, an old man with an unlimited supply of the legends of old Ireland and the "learning that was handed down from the generations in the Visiting Houses before now" (Act I, p. 37), holds a contest of learning with young Tim Corry, who is courting the daughter of the merryman:

> Mickle. Who were the giants and unbelievers of olden times, that believed in no religion but strength and reckoned they could conquer the whole world in strength?
>
> Tim. I give in; I'm ignorant of them, Mickle.

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[8] Michael Molloy, "The Visiting House", Act I, Seven Irish Plays, p. 32. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition of the play.

Mickle. (scornfully). Did you never hear tell in all your schooling of Finn and Ossian and Goll McMorna, and Conawn and Oscar, and Diarmuid Donn? And their seven regiments, every member giants too, and unbelievers, and all putting in their time at sharpening their weapons, making corpses of heroes, and putting it all down in history? With all your education, you're ignorant of them, Corry?

(Act I, p. 37)

Ireland's traditions are dying out with the old, and any promise for the future is leaving with the young. Mary Heavey can prevent Tim's emigration to England only by consenting to marry him and by bringing him into the life of the Visiting House.

A second contest of learning is held between Mickle and the "best educated" man in the village, Verb To Be, who has nothing but contempt for Mickle's flights of fancy. However, in his insistence on the authority of book-learning, and in his inability to perceive the imaginative truths embodied in myth, Verb To Be proves himself to be more ignorant than Mickle, and the contest is rightfully judged in favor of the latter: Verb To Be has no learning, only education. The old myths cannot be simply dismissed as lies because they have not been historically or scientifically substantiated.

Like Synge and O'Casey, Molloy is a master of comic dialect and amplification, and his style is admirably suited to such a fanciful treatment of Irish myth. In The Visiting House, through the use of the Fenian Cycle, he contrasts the rich traditions of the past with the spiritual vacuity of the present.